

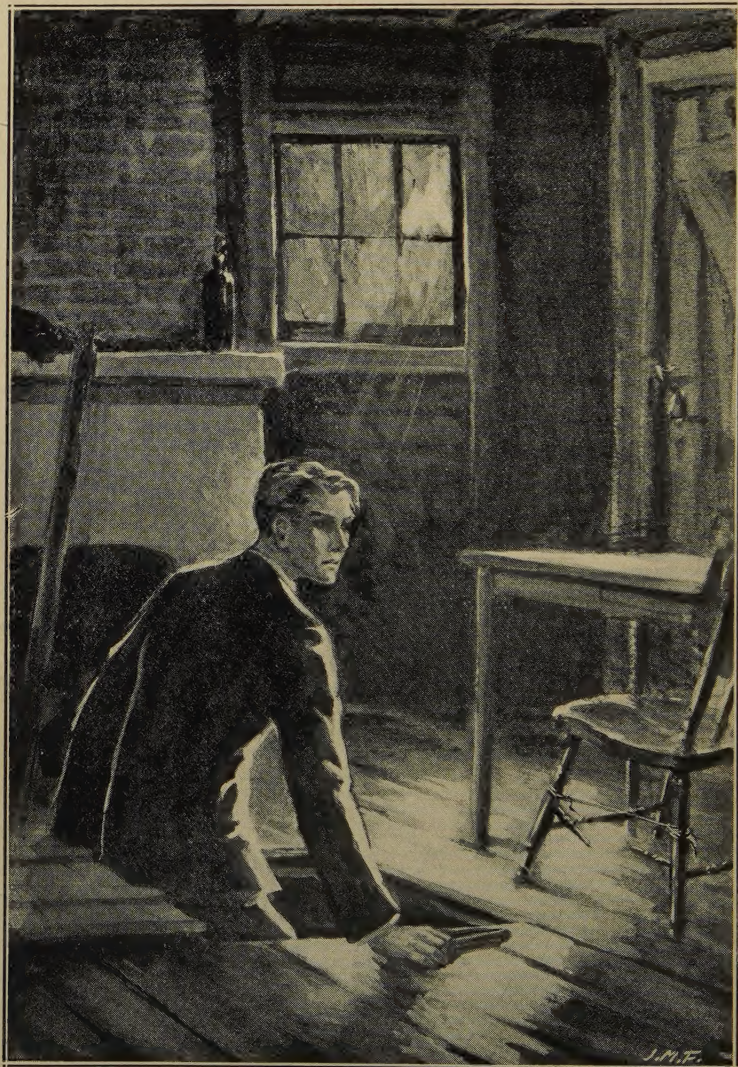
THE CLIFF ISLAND MYSTERY



PHILIP · A · BARTLETT







Roy Stover drew himself up and looked swiftly around him.
(*The Cliff Island Mystery*)

(Frontispiece)

ROY STOVER STORIES
**THE CLIFF ISLAND
MYSTERY**

BY
PHILIP A. BARTLETT

*Author of "The Lakeport Bank Mystery," "The
Mystery of the Snowbound Express," Etc.*

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN M. FOSTER

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I A BITTER ARGUMENT	7
II CROOKED WORK	16
III FIGHTING THE FLAMES	28
IV THE FINGER OF SUSPICION	35
V TAKING CHANCES	44
VI ON THE TRAIL	51
VII PICKING UP CLUES	61
VIII HARD TO FIND	69
IX CLIFF ISLAND	77
X THE WARNING RATTLE	84
XI A CLOSE CALL	90
XII THE MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE	97
XIII GHOSTLY TERRORS	103
XIV THE CREEPING DEATH	112
XV THE FACE AT THE WINDOW	118
XVI A FRUITLESS CHASE	126
XVII THE SCOOP	139
XVIII IN THE PIT	151
XIX THE MISSING MOTORBOAT	159

CHAPTER	PAGE
XX THE BLOW FROM BEHIND	171
XXI PADDING FOOTSTEPS	179
XXII A DASH FOR LIBERTY	188
XXIII THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER	199
XXIV THE DOWNRUSHING ROCK	204
XXV CLOSE TO DEATH	209
XXVI A NEW HINT	216
XXVII GETTING CLOSER	223
XXVIII DRAWING THE NET	229
XXIX A TERRIFIC BATTLE	235
XXX BROUGHT TO JUSTICE	242

ILLUSTRATIONS

Roy Stover drew himself up and looked swiftly
around him. (Page 177) . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"Easy there," he warned. "You're a bigger man
than he is" 16

With a sensation of dread the young reporter
kept on his way 136

"Find out! Find out!" screamed the man . . . 190

THE CLIFF ISLAND MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

A BITTER ARGUMENT

"SOME storm, I'll tell the world!" muttered Roy Stover to himself, as for the twentieth time he wiped the windshield of his car and peered through the blinding torrent of rain ahead.

The young reporter of the Lakeport *Eagle* was returning from an assignment that had carried him some ten miles from his home town. He had been detailed to interview the organizer of a real estate development in a small neighboring city, and the work had taken him longer than he had expected.

Before he had started back it had begun to rain, and he had not gone far before the rain developed into a downpour. It seemed to Roy as though all the windows of heaven had been opened.

Things were made worse by a stiff wind that was beating the rain against his windshield and obscuring his view of the road. His impulse was to speed up and get home as soon as possible, but he did not dare go fast for fear of a possible collision with cars coming the other way. The road was narrow and

barely permitted two cars to pass. What added to his discomfort was that the rain was driven into the sides of his car and he was thoroughly drenched.

But this was all in the day's work for a reporter, who had to be out at all hours and in all kinds of weather, and Roy Stover summoned up his philosophy and drove on.

He had gone but little farther when he caught sight of the figure of a man standing under a heavy clump of trees by the roadside, where he had sought shelter.

Roy stopped his car as he recognized in the figure Jim Tully, a farmer and a good friend of his, whose farm was on the road he was traveling a few miles farther on.

"Hello, Jim!" called Roy. "The storm caught you, did it? Hop in and I'll take you home."

"You bet I will, Roy!" assented Jim eagerly, as he climbed in beside the young reporter. "Gee, I'm in luck that you came along! Cars are scarce along the road on a day like this. I thought I'd reach home before the storm came on, but I got left. Ain't seen it rain like this for a long time."

"It sure is coming down for keeps," agreed Roy. "How are Mrs. Tully and the kids?"

"Fine, thankee," returned Jim. "You kin stop in an' see for yourself when we git there, an' Marthy'll make you a cup of coffee. That'll take off the chill from your wet clothes. How's everything going with you in Lakeport? Caught any more diamond thieves?" he chuckled.

"No," replied Roy, smiling. "A break like that doesn't come very often. I had a bit of luck in that matter."

"Luck nothin'!" exclaimed Jim warmly. "It was right smart detective work, if you ask me. Police was all up in the air till you took hold an' ketched the thief dead to rights. Whole town was ringin' with the way you brought that scamp to justice."

"Well, that was just once," replied Roy. "Might be ten years before anything big like that breaks again in Lakeport. In the meantime, I'll be plugging along, covering the police courts, writing up fires, petty thefts, divorces, society notes, and truck like that."

"Just once, eh?" replied Jim. "How about the time you exposed the bank swindle an' saved four hundred thousand dollars for the people of Lakeport? I had some money of my own in the bank that time, an' I ain't forgittin' who saved it for me. An' the people in the town ain't forgittin' it, either."

"Well, say twice then," admitted Roy. "Probably no other chances of that kind will come my way again as long as I live. Sometimes I think it would be better for me to try my luck with some of the big papers in one of the great cities. There's something doing there all the time. That is, if I could get a job with one of them."

"They'd be glad enough to git you," declared Jim. "Your pa was tellin' me only the other day that you'd got several offers from them after you'd cleaned up

them mysteries. You needn't be so blamed modest. Them fellers know brains when they see it. All the same, I hope you'll stay in Lakeport. We ain't got so many smart young fellers that we kin afford to lose one o' the best o' them. But here we are now at the old shebang," he added, as Roy turned into the Tully gateway and drove up to the porch. "Git down an' come in for a cup o' coffee an' to dry your clothes."

"No, thank you, Jim," returned Roy. "I've got some stuff that must go in the paper, and I'm late as it is. Some other time."

Mrs. Tully, who had come to the door, warmly seconded her husband's invitation, but Roy Stover smilingly declined and resumed his journey.

It was still raining "cats and dogs" and the dirt road was a sea of mud. However, the young reporter had less than five miles to go, and he proceeded as fast as the road permitted, eager to bring the dismal journey to an end.

Some minutes passed without incident. Then he became conscious that the car was lagging, not working right. A passing motorist pointed, grinning, to one of the rear wheels.

Roy looked out and saw that one of his tires was flat. An exclamation of vexation came from his lips.

"Picked up a nail somewhere, I'll bet," he muttered, as he drew the car to the side of the road and stepped out to inspect the damage.

His supposition was correct. The head of a large nail was visible on the tire. From its size Roy knew that the nail had reached and penetrated the inner tube.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," Roy Stover grumbled to himself. "I'll have to take it off and mend it or I'll be riding on the rim by the time I get to Lakeport. What a fool I was to leave my spare tire in the garage!"

An annoying task at the best of times, it was doubly so now with the rain coming down in torrents.

He looked about him for some place where he could work under shelter. At a little distance he descried a roadhouse by the side of which was a large shed for the parking of cars.

"Just made to order for me," murmured Roy, as he climbed into the car again and drove for the shed.

Once under cover, he got out his kit and set to work to repair the tire.

Fortunately for Roy, the shed was almost empty. In one corner stood a dilapidated buggy which had evidently been out of repair for years and at the other end two closed cars were parked.

"Not the cleanest kind of job in this sort of weather," murmured the youth as he surveyed the water and mud on the tire. "However, I've got to make the best of it."

He took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves and started to work. At first the old tire stuck and he

had to use a screwdriver to pry it loose. This was rather warm work and he had to stop several times to wipe the perspiration from his face.

"Gee, there is one thing sure—I certainly wouldn't care to change tires for a living," he muttered to himself.

The young reporter was deft with his hands, and in fifteen minutes the tire was as good as new. He replaced it and looked at his grimy hands.

"Guess I'll drop in and wash my hands," he told himself. "Then I'll get a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Not that I care for them much, but I can't use the facilities of the place without giving it a bit of custom."

He entered the roadhouse and nodded to Con Casey, the proprietor. It was a quiet, well conducted place, and Casey had never been in trouble with the authorities.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Stover," was Casey's greeting. "Bad day to be out in. How's every little thing?"

"Not so good," replied Roy. "Got a flat tire and have been mending it out in your shed. Stepped in for a wash and a bite."

He made his way to the washroom, and upon returning from it seated himself at a table and ordered a sandwich and coffee.

While he was waiting he scanned the room idly. It was almost vacant, for few motorists were abroad that day who were not compelled to be, and it was

upon the motor trade that the house chiefly depended for custom.

In the rear of the main room four men were playing billiards. The only other occupants of the place were two men seated at a table not far from Roy.

The man facing in his direction Roy recognized at a glance. It was John Brackenbone, a prominent real estate developer and operator in that section.

He was a heavily built man with rugged features that bespoke power and ruthlessness. His eyebrows were shaggy and beneath them hard, steely eyes looked out. There was a suggestion of cruelty in the thin, tight-lipped line of the mouth.

He was reputed to have amassed large wealth in his line of business. Little was known of his antecedents prior to his coming to Lakeport.

The young reporter had found him brusque and overbearing. He had never liked the man and felt distrust of him. This, however, was purely instinctive, for he knew nothing to the man's discredit in a business way.

Brackenbone's companion, seated with his back toward Roy, was of a different type. He was small, nervous, and wiry. There was something familiar about him, but Roy could not identify him until the man half turned in his chair. Then, with a feeling of surprise, Roy recognized him as Victor Lawrence, the father of Maizie Lawrence, a young girl who was employed in the *Eagle* offices.

Mr. Lawrence was the proprietor of a stationery

store in Lakeport, where he had resided for twenty years. He was a man of good repute, well liked and respected in the town. His business ability, however, was not very marked, and he had not been able to accumulate much either in money or property.

What was it that had brought together, Roy wondered idly, two people so widely contrasted, Victor Lawrence, the struggling business man who could barely do more than to keep his head above water, and John Brackenbone, whose wealth was reckoned in the hundreds of thousands? What had the two in common?

Perhaps nothing. They might have dropped in separately and, finding each other there, drifted together for a casual chat, as men will at a roadside inn. Roy dismissed the matter from his mind and applied himself to the refreshments that were placed before him.

But occasional words that drifted toward him from the neighboring table compelled his attention. This was no casual chat in which the men were engaged. Rather it was a heated conversation that bordered very closely on a quarrel.

Lawrence seemed to be doing most of the talking. At times he seemed to be pleading, at other times threatening.

Brackenbone sat back in his chair with an ugly frown on his face that twisted at times into a sneer. When he answered at all, it was usually in curt monosyllables.

"I tell you I won't stand for it," Roy heard Lawrence say.

"And I tell you, you've got to stand for it," snapped Brackenbone, rising from his seat. "I'm tired of this whining and I haven't any time to waste on pikers."

"You have time enough to take the pikers' money!" cried Lawrence, also rising and kicking back his chair. "But you've picked the wrong customer this time. You can't swindle me, John Brackenbone."

Wild with anger, he launched himself against the big man and grabbed him by the throat.

CHAPTER II

CROOKED WORK

SO SUDDEN and fierce was the attack that Victor Lawrence made upon John Brackenbone that Brackenbone, although much the larger and heavier of the two, was borne back and almost measured his length on the floor.

He regained his balance by a great effort, shook himself free from the clutch on his throat, and raised his huge fist to strike.

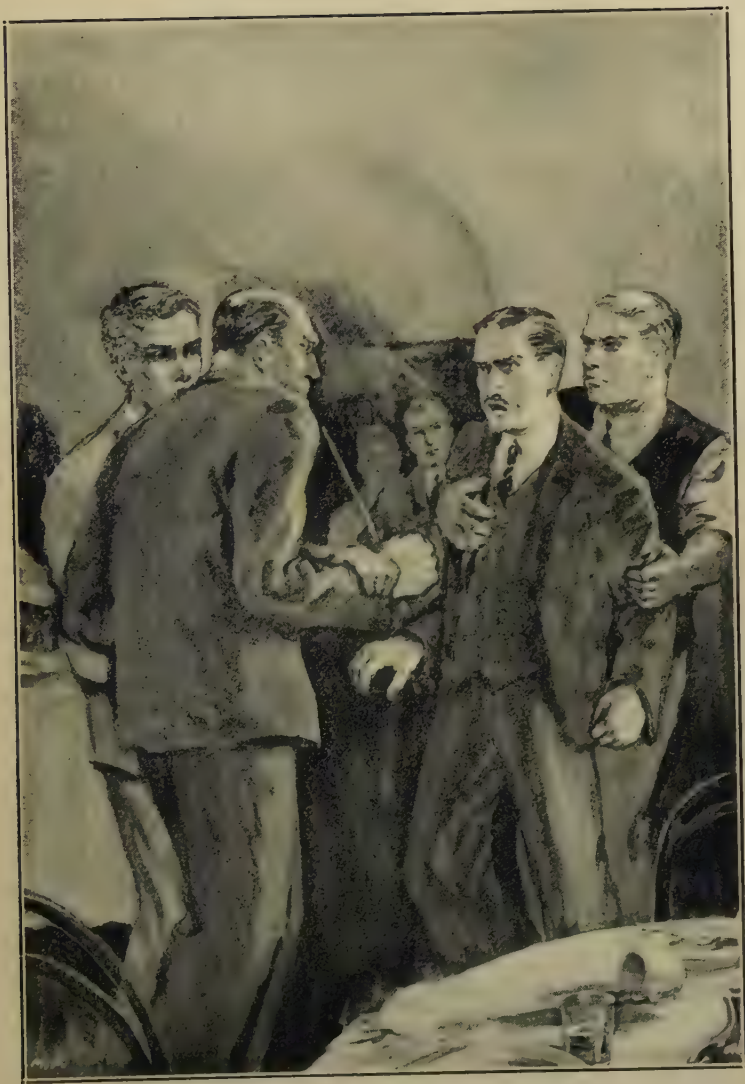
Before the blow could fall Casey darted between the two angry men and pushed them apart by main force.

"Nothing like that here," he commanded. "I keep a decent place and there's going to be no rough house. If you gentlemen want to settle your argument, you can step outside."

Brackenbone again raised his fist, but Roy Stover, who had rushed over from his table, caught his arm.

"Easy there," he warned. "You're a bigger man than he is. Hold your horses."

Brackenbone struggled to release his arm, but Roy held it with a grip of iron.



"Easy there," he warned. "You're a bigger man than he is."

(The Cliff Island Mystery)

(Page 16)

"Let me at him!" the big man shouted. "I'll pulverize him!"

"You'll do nothing of the kind," retorted Roy, not relaxing his hold a particle. "He's a friend of mine and I won't see him struck by a man twice his size. Cool down."

"What did he want to start it for, then?" growled Brackenbone.

"I'll tell you why!" shouted Lawrence, still in the grasp of the burly Casey. "Because you're a thief and a swindler and I couldn't get satisfaction any other way. Somebody ought to kill you, you thieving skunk!"

"You'd better be careful how you sling language of that kind around," threatened Brackenbone. "I could take you to court for that."

Lawrence laughed bitterly.

"Catch you going to court!" he cried. "That's the one place you're anxious to steer clear of, for I'd have a chance to show up your dirty dealings. Go ahead. Summon me to court. I dare you to!"

The controversy was taking a turn that Brackenbone did not relish. He looked around uneasily. The billiard players had left their table, gathered around the disputants, and were listening eagerly.

"I'll waste no more time listening to your ravings," growled Brackenbone. He took a bill out of his pocket and tendered it to Casey.

"Take the money for my meal out of that," he said. "Don't bother about the change."

He stamped out heavily, slamming the door behind him.

"My car's outside, Mr. Lawrence," suggested Roy gently. "Suppose you let me take you back to Lakeport, if you're going that way."

"Thank you, Roy," assented Victor Lawrence, who was trembling from the nervous reaction to his fit of anger.

He paid his bill and he and the young reporter went out and climbed into the car. The rain had subsided somewhat, but the mud was deep and the going slow.

Roy Stover said nothing, but waited for Mr. Lawrence to speak in his own good time.

"I don't know what you think of me, Roy," Lawrence said, after the silence had lasted for some time. "I'm ashamed that I lost control of myself. But that man exasperated me to the limit."

"I understand," replied Roy sympathetically. "Everyone loses his temper at times."

"Do you know anything about Brackenbone?" asked Lawrence abruptly.

"Not very much," responded Roy. "I know, of course, that he's a large operator in real estate and is supposed to be wealthy."

"Wealthy!" repeated Lawrence bitterly. "And how has he become wealthy? On other people's money."

"I don't know anything about that," said Roy.

"Well, I know," replied Lawrence. "Know to my cost. He's swindled me out of three thousand dollars."

Roy Stover was genuinely startled. Three thousand dollars would not be much for some people, but Roy knew that it was a lot to a man in Victor Lawrence's circumstances. Probably all that he had.

"I'm dreadfully sorry to hear that, Mr. Lawrence," said Roy, with real concern. "Swindled you, you say? There must be some way to get it back. He's good for any judgment you might get against him many times over. Or he'd probably pay it back, anyway, if you threatened to have him arrested."

"That's just the trouble," replied Lawrence. "I can't have him arrested. He's too cunning for that. He's covered his tracks too well. He's robbed me under the forms of law. Three thousand dollars! Practically all the money I had in the world. Money that it took me years and years to save, one dollar at a time, pinching and scraping and going without, watching it grow little by little, depending upon it to help support me in my old age. And now it's gone, all gone!"

He wrung his hands in anguished helplessness and despair.

Roy Stover was deeply moved by his companion's distress. He leaned over and touched the trembling hands consolingly.

"Don't be too sure that it's all gone, Mr. Lawrence," he urged. "I haven't had much experience of life, to be sure, but I've had enough to know that from almost any trouble there is some way out. I don't want to pry, at all, but if you care to tell me just

how it all happened, I may be able to suggest something that will help. I surely will if I can."

"It all started because I was a fool," said Lawrence, in deep self-reproach. "I got impatient with the slow way in which I was saving money and looked about for some way to make it more quickly. So I was just in the mood to fall for the bait that that oily schemer, John Brackenbone, held out for me. And not only for me, but for lots of other gudgeons in Lakeport and around about. You'd be surprised to know how many folks in the old town are in the same box with me."

"Is that so?" asked Roy, pricking up his ears. His reportorial instincts awoke. He scented a story. Up to now he had been wholly absorbed in his personal sympathy for his companion. That feeling was still uppermost but another was added to it. Here was the possibility of a scoop for the *Eagle*, and he was as keen after it as a terrier after a rat.

"Yes," sighed Mr. Lawrence. "He spread his net wide and gathered a lot into its meshes. He came to me with a glowing picture of a new real estate development that he was projecting and which was to yield large profits to those who were lucky enough to get in on the ground floor. I was foolish enough to be impressed by it. He seemed to be a reliable man and he had a reputation for success in his undertakings. So I drew my money from the bank and put it into his hands. Fool, fool that I was!"

"But you must have some contract, some agreement that you can hold him to," suggested Roy.

"Oh, yes; a beautifully drawn up and legal-looking agreement that isn't worth to me the paper it's written on."

"Why not?"

"Because of cunning clauses in fine print that seemed innocent enough but left Brackenbone the absolute master of the situation. A sort of blind pool, as it were. Brackenbone was to develop the tract, and when the lots in it were sold I was to have my share of the profits.

"That seems fair enough," remarked Roy. "You can hold him to that."

"Wait a minute," said Victor Lawrence. "There was no date stipulated at which the development was to commence. It was expressly agreed that it should begin whenever Brackenbone deemed the time propitious. That was to be left to his judgment as an experienced real estate man. In his verbal talks with me, which he could of course deny, it was understood that it was to be within a few months; but in the written agreement the date of beginning is left expressly to him."

A great light burst upon Roy Stover.

"I see," he said. "Then he can start twenty, forty, fifty years from now, if he wants to. He can defer it up to the moment of his death. In the meantime he has your money to do with as he pleases."

"Exactly," agreed Lawrence. "Did you ever see such a fool as I am?"

The young reporter secretly was of the opinion that he seldom had, but he refrained from saying so.

"How long ago was it that you went into this deal with Brackenbone?"

"About two years ago."

"And in all that time has nothing been done toward the development?" Roy asked.

"Not a thing," declared Lawrence. "I've been over to the tract in question a number of times, and it's still as wild and overgrown as it was at the start. Not a shovelful of earth has been turned. Not a single step has been taken."

"What has Brackenbone had to say when you've put the thing up to him?" asked Roy.

"Oh, he's stalled along on all sorts of pretexts," was the answer. "One time the excuse was that there was a slight kink in the title that had to be straightened out. Another time labor was too high and he thought that in a few months it would come down. Again, it looked as though there was going to be a slump in real estate and it would be better to wait till the prospects grew brighter. Oh, he's had plenty of excuses! And all the time the conviction has been growing on me that I've been deliberately swindled, that he's never had the least idea of carrying out the project. To-day I demanded my money back. He laughed at me. Told me to try to get it. Then you know what happened."

Victor Lawrence slumped back dejectedly into his seat.

Roy Stover was boiling with anger.

"The low-down skunk!" he exclaimed. "He ought to be exposed, driven out of town. But don't give up, Mr. Lawrence. We'll get him yet."

While the quick mind of the young reporter is darting here and there, trying to find some way to punish the rascal and rescue his friend from his predicament, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not read the preceding volumes of this series, to tell who Roy Stover was and what had been his adventures up to the time this story opens.

Roy, now about eighteen years of age, had lived all his life in Lakeport, a wideawake, bustling city of about twenty thousand inhabitants. His father, William B. Stover, was the editor and proprietor of the Lakeport *Eagle*, a daily newspaper of the place, and was a leader in the civic activities of the town. Roy's mother, Mrs. Emily Stover, was a gracious woman, who made the home over which she presided an exceptionally happy one. Roy's sister, Nell, was a blond, pretty girl four years older than her brother.

Roy was a stalwart, clean-cut young fellow, with brown hair and eyes and fair complexion. He was frank, courageous and truthful, and while he did not look for trouble, never evaded it when it came. In high school, from which he had graduated some time before, he had been a leader in football, baseball and other sports.

His special chum and intimate was Elmer Raymond, a son of the proprietor of a dock and of vessels that he let out for hire, and with him Roy had many a good time on Eagle Lake, a large body of water on which the city was situated.

On his graduation from the high school Roy had been taken into his father's office as a cub reporter. There was one other daily paper in Lakeport, the *News*, between which and its older competitor, the *Eagle*, there was a keen rivalry.

Roy found himself under the direct orders of Gardner, the managing editor of the *Eagle*, a veteran newspaper man, whose tongue was sharp and who, because of his passion for condensing everything into the narrowest possible compass, was irreverently referred to by his subordinates as "Old Cut-to-the-Bone" Gardner. But the discipline, if hard, was effective, and Roy from a callow cub gradually became an experienced reporter with a keen nose for news and unusual ability in making it interesting.

His first chance for a big beat came when the community was startled by two robberies in succession of the Lakeport National Bank. For a long time the affair was shrouded in mystery. The police department was clearly puzzled. How Roy Stover conceived a theory of his own as to the motive and perpetrator of the crime, how he ran down one clue after another at great personal risk and the thrilling adventures he met with in his search are told in the first volume of this series entitled: "The Lakeport Bank Mystery."

Following this came a period of quiet, during which Roy kept on steadily mastering the essentials of a reporter's work. Then, during a blizzard, he found himself involved in a series of events that threatened to destroy his good name. Diamonds to the amount of a hundred thousand dollars in value were stolen from a passenger on a train stalled in the snow.

Roy himself was accused of the crime. He was even arrested and held for the grand jury.

Desperate at the cloud that rested upon him, the young reporter worked day and night to find the real criminal. This was a difficult task that seemed at times hopeless. When at last, after following many blind trails, his suspicion fixed on one man, he found it difficult to get the actual proof. What dangers he encountered, the skill and daring with which he hung to the trail, and the exciting climax of his endeavors are narrated in the preceding volume of this series, entitled: "The Mystery of the Snowbound Express."

Now to return to Roy Stover as he stared unseeingly at the road ahead and cudgeled his brains to find some way to thwart the scoundrelly scheme of John Brack-enbone.

This promised to be no easy task, for Brack-enbone had money and ruthlessness. No doubt, too, he had unscrupulous lawyers. Probably he had relied on them to frame the iniquitous contract that permitted him to gain his ends while keeping ostensibly under cover of the law.

"It's a complicated case, Mr. Lawrence," said Roy

after some minutes of silence. "With the contract reading that way, it looks as though he had a strangle hold on you. But that doesn't follow. The court construes a contract in the light of reason. If it's inequitable or fraudulent, the judge won't allow it to stand. If you can show, as you say you can, that Brackenbone has delayed unreasonably in starting his development and apparently has no intention of starting it at all, I'm sure the court will order him to do one of two things, either start work within a given time or return to you your money. The first thing for you to do is to get a good lawyer. Maybe the mere threat of a suit will make Brackenbone cough up."

"I suppose you're right," agreed Mr. Lawrence. "But there again comes in the question of money. I'll have to pay my lawyer and pay, too, for a lot of incidental expenses. Suppose even I get a judgment. Brackenbone can take one appeal after another and drag it through the courts for years."

"He may," admitted Roy. "But I don't think he'll stand suit if he sees you're determined. If the thing becomes public, all the others he's got in the same box will be on his neck. He'll want to avoid that publicity, and so will probably settle with you. At any rate, that's the one thing for you to do."

"I think you're right, Roy, and I'll do it," declared Mr. Lawrence. "This fighting talk of yours has certainly done me good. I'm not going to take this thing lying down."

They reached Lakeport soon after this and Roy, after dropping his companion at the latter's place of business, drove on to the *Eagle* office.

He had been greatly perturbed by the revelations of Victor Lawrence. He liked and respected the man and hated to see him cheated by a rascal. For a rascal John Brackenbone certainly was, in Roy's opinion. No honorable business man would ever frame a contract in terms that made one party to the agreement so utterly helpless against the other if the latter chose to swindle.

But Roy Stover's concern went further than Victor Lawrence's particular case. The latter had stated that many others in Lakeport had fallen victim to Brackenbone's game. Was Roy Stover going to stand aside and see his friends and neighbors cheated? Not if he knew himself! That was not the Roy Stover way!

"I'll get John Brackenbone!" he said to himself, as he climbed out of his car and entered the *Eagle* building.

CHAPTER III

FIGHTING THE FLAMES

THE first person whom Roy Stover saw when he entered the editorial department of the *Eagle* on the second floor of the building was Maizie Lawrence, clicking away at her typewriter.

Maizie was a pretty girl as well as a clever and capable office assistant. She had been with the *Eagle* for two years and was well versed in the routine of newspaper work. She and Roy were on excellent terms, their friendship dating from the time when they had been students together in high school.

"Greetings, fair maiden of the keys," said Roy, as he paused a moment at her desk.

Maizie looked up.

"Hello, Roy," she said. "You look like a drowned rat."

"She scorns me!" Roy complained to the world. "Don't forget, haughty beauty, that a noble heart may beat beneath a wet coat."

"Tell that to Gardner and see what he says about it," retorted Maizie. "He's having seventeen fits be-

hind that closed door because you've been away so long."

"It's sweet to be missed," murmured Roy. "Shows how important I am to the paper. What would happen to the poor old *Eagle* if I left it flat upon its back?"

"Oh, it would manage to struggle along somehow," replied Maizie. "It did, you know, before you came."

"Stung again," moaned Roy. "Well, I'm not getting any sympathy here——"

"You'll find it in the dictionary," suggested Maizie sweetly.

"So I might as well go in and beard the lion in his den," concluded Roy.

"Look out for his claws," cautioned Maizie.

Gardner looked up from a mass of papers on his desk as Roy entered his room.

"So you're back at last," he snapped. "I was thinking of sending out an alarm for you. What kept you so long?"

"The storm and mud to some extent," replied Roy. "Had a flat tire among other things. Then, too, I had to wait for the interview. Mitchell wasn't in when I got there."

"Why didn't you 'phone the news in?" demanded Gardner.

"Not many chances to do that," replied Roy. "I might have done it from Casey's roadhouse——"

"Ah, the roadhouse!" growled Gardner. "Stopped in for a game of pool, perhaps. Never mind, never

mind," he went on impatiently, as Roy tried to interpose a denial. "Let's see your stuff. What did you get?"

Roy handed over his notes and Gardner ran over them hurriedly.

"Humph!" he snorted, as he tossed them back. "Not much in the story after all. Hardly worth going after. Go ahead now and write it up. And cut it to the bone."

The telephone on his desk rang. Gardner picked up the receiver.

"*Eagle* office," he said. "This is Gardner— What's that? A fire?— Bad one, eh?— Raymond's dock, you say— All right. I'll send a man right down."

He hung up and turned to Roy, who had paused before leaving the room.

"Fire at Raymond's dock," he announced. "Seems to be a nasty one. Drop those papers. I'll have somebody else write them up. Jump into your car and get down there pronto."

Roy dashed out of the room, went down the steps three at a time, jumped into his car and made with all speed for the scene of the fire.

Engines were clanging their way down the main street. A procession of cars was making in the same direction while men and boys and a number of girls on the sidewalks were running toward the glare that came from the border of the lake.

Roy had a personal concern in this. Elmer Raymond, the son of the dock owner, was his closest

friend. He earnestly hoped as he raced along that the fire would not bring disaster to his friend's father and that he was amply covered by insurance.

He reached the place in fast time, showed his card to the police cordon that had been thrown around the place to keep spectators at a distance, and was admitted within the fire lines.

It was a dismaying sight that met his gaze. One end of the dock was in flames and red streaks were licking at the sides.

The firemen had unreeled their hose and were throwing tons of water on the flames, but so far without any marked effect.

Men were darting hither and thither, trying to loosen skiffs and motorboats and vessels of various kinds from their moorings. These included not only those belonging to Mr. Raymond, but others belonging to private persons that were laid up at the dock.

There were many of these, and some that had been moored at the end of the dock were already burning. Others at the side were as yet untouched or only partly burned, and it was toward these that frantic efforts were being directed.

It was dangerous work, for many of them were motorboats with stores of gasoline on board and might explode at any moment.

Roy ran across Elmer Raymond, who was working frantically, smoke-begrimed and panting.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Elmer!" exclaimed Roy. "What can I do to help? Just tell me and I'll do it."

"Good of you, Roy," replied Elmer. "You could help, but I don't want to ask you to, for it's mighty dangerous. You understand how to handle a motorboat and there are not enough around here who do. But there—I won't let you. We'll manage to get along somehow."

"I'd like to see you stop me!" cried Roy, throwing off his coat. "Here, I'll take this one," and he sprang into a motorboat at the side of the dock.

Willing hands helped to cast off the ropes and Roy Stover started the engine going and darted out into the lake.

Sparks and embers from the burning pier fell in showers on the boat, but luckily none of them reached the gasoline supply.

Roy turned the nose of the boat toward another dock some distance away and out of the danger zone. There he moored it and rushed back to the scene of action.

Again and again he repeated the dangerous task until he had accounted for four of the boats. His hands and arms were blistered in places by the falling embers, but he was so excited and absorbed in his work that he was scarcely conscious of the pain.

By this time the efforts of the firemen were beginning to tell. The first fiery onset of the flames had been subdued and the blaze was under control.

Some of the boats had been entirely consumed, others burned in part, but the majority had been saved and were without injury.

There was nothing more to do at the moment but to watch the flames die down.

"That was great work you did for us, old boy," said Elmer gratefully, as he put his hand on Roy's shoulder. "Some of those boats would have surely exploded if you hadn't been right on the spot."

"I only wish I could have done more," returned Roy, as he slipped on his coat. "How about the fire, Elmer? I hope your father is fully covered by insurance."

"I think he is," replied Elmer. "But of course a fire always means a loss of some kind; for one thing, the loss of trade while the dock is being rebuilt."

"How about the boats?" asked Roy.

"Those belonging to other people were at the owners' risks," replied Elmer. "That's the only condition on which we take them."

"That boat out there seems to be pretty badly burned," remarked Roy, pointing to a handsome boat that had been taken some distance out on the lake.

"Yes, and it was the most costly one of the bunch," replied Elmer. "Belongs to Brackenbone."

"John Brackenbone, the real estate operator?" asked Roy, with quickened interest.

"That's the one. I suppose he'll raise a howl that can be heard a mile when he sees it. He's a domineering fellow. Doesn't care what hard luck happens to other people, but thinks it mustn't happen to him."

"You don't seem to care very much for him," remarked Roy.

"I don't," admitted Elmer frankly. "And as for what father thinks of him—well, it wouldn't be fit for publication."

"Sore at him, is he?" queried Roy, his thought going to what Victor Lawrence had told him of "other people" in Lakeport.

"Sore's no name for it. But, speaking of angels, here's his nibs now."

An auto had driven up to the dock and John Brackbone stepped out. He shouldered his way truculently through the throng to where Mr. Raymond was standing a few feet away from Roy and Elmer.

"Look here!" he boomed in his rough voice. "What do you mean by letting my yacht burn?"

CHAPTER IV

THE FINGER OF SUSPICION

NICHOLAS RAYMOND looked John Brackenbone up and down calmly.

"I'm not accustomed to being roared at like that," he replied. "What do you mean by 'letting your yacht burn?' Do you suppose I did it on purpose?"

"I mean just what I say," pursued Brackenbone belligerently. "I left the yacht in your care. You were supposed to look after it and keep it safe. And there it lies out in the lake, burned almost to the water's edge. What have you got to say about it?"

"I'll have a lot to say about it if you don't moderate your tone," retorted Mr. Raymond. "The simple fact is that the dock caught fire. How it happened I don't know yet. I got your yacht away from it as quickly as I could."

"The dock caught fire!" sneered Brackenbone. "Why did you let it catch fire? Whose business is it to keep it from catching fire? Culpable negligence somewhere. Well, you'll pay me for the damage or I'll know the reason why."

"I'll pay you nothing," declared Mr. Raymond. "It

was distinctly agreed that your boat was left here at your own risk as far as fire was concerned. All I was responsible for was to keep it from being stolen."

"We'll see about that," roared Brackenbone. "We'll see what the court has to say about it."

"Are you really anxious to know what the court has to say about certain things, John Brackenbone?" asked Mr. Raymond, regarding him steadily. "If so, you may have the chance sooner than you think. I've been thinking myself I'd like to ask it something, something for instance about a certain contract in real estate. Get me?"

That John Brackenbone "got him" was evident. Roy Stover saw a look of something very like fear come into his eyes. The man wilted visibly and changed his tone almost immediately.

"Well, well," he said placatingly, "I suppose there's no use of losing our tempers over this thing. Naturally, I was excited over having the yacht burn, but what's done is done and there's no use grouching over it. I'll look it over to-morrow, and perhaps it will turn out not to be as badly damaged as it looks to be. These things will happen sometimes and we'll just have to charge it up to bad luck."

He turned on his heel and went to his car.

"A change came over the spirit of his dream," murmured Elmer, with a chuckle.

"Did you ever see anyone change as quickly from a raging lion to a cooing dove?" asked Roy. "Your

dad seemed to be holding the trump card in that game. What's the answer?"

"I don't know exactly," replied Elmer. "I only know that dad's been grumpy and sore for some time past over some deal or other he had with Brackenbone. Whatever it was, he hates the very sight of the fellow."

Was Nicholas Raymond, then, a fellow victim with Victor Lawrence of John Brackenbone? Roy wondered. The plot was thickening. How many more in Lakeport were in the same net?

In writing up the notes for his story of the fire the young reporter had occasion to find out from Mr. Raymond the details regarding the insurance. The dock owner gave them readily.

"I suppose the greatest damage to the boats was that done to Brackenbone's yacht," remarked Roy, in an attempt to turn the conversation to that individual.

"Yes," replied Mr. Raymond, his eyes becoming hard. "But it won't cost him anything. He'll repair it with other people's money."

"Other people's money!" The exact words used by Victor Lawrence!

"Just what do you mean by that, Mr. Raymond?" asked Roy, scribbling away industriously. "The money of the insurance people?"

"No!" burst out Mr. Raymond bitterly. "Suckers' money! Fools' money!" He checked himself as though he had been betrayed into saying more than he intended. "Never mind about that," he said. "All

I've got to say is that if Brackenbone isn't careful he'll land in the cemetery. But don't quote me as saying that. Now as to that insurance you were asking me about."

He went on with the details and resolutely refused to be steered again in the direction of Brackenbone.

As soon as the young reporter had all the facts he required he hurried back to the *Eagle* offices and sat down to write out his story.

He was still thrilling with the excitement of the fire and his hazardous rescue of the threatened motorboats and he wrote a capital account of it. So good a one, indeed, that even Gardner, as he ran his eye over the sheets, could find no fault with it.

"Not so bad," he grunted, and that from Gardner was high praise. "Guess you can call it a day now and run on. Everything else is pretty well cleaned up."

Maizie was putting on her hat and coat to go home when Roy came into the outer office.

"Ah!" said Roy, "I'm just in time to walk home with you."

"How do you know I'll let you?" Maizie countered.

"Instinct tells me," replied Roy. "A sure knowledge of the fatal charm I have for the loveliest of her sex."

"You hate yourself, don't you?" replied Maizie. "Just for that I'll go by myself."

"Then this is the time for cave-man stuff," said Roy, assuming a threatening attitude. "Come along, woman! And quick! Hear me? Or must I drag you by the hair?"

He grasped her arm and they went laughingly down the stairs. For a time they chatted about indifferent matters. Then Roy remarked:

"I saw your father to-day, Maizie."

She looked up quickly.

"Did you? Where?" she asked.

"Out at Casey's roadhouse. I stopped in there to get a bite, and I gave him a lift home."

"At Casey's roadhouse!" repeated Maizie wonderingly. "What in the world took him out there on a day like this?"

"Had an appointment with Brackenbone, the real estate man," replied Roy. "They were talking together when I went in."

"Brackenbone! That man!" exclaimed Maizie, in a tone that spoke volumes. "Oh, how I wish that father had never seen him!"

"I guess it would have been much better if he never had," replied Roy. "Your father told me all about that deal of his as we were coming home. I have a strong impression that Brackenbone is a swindler."

"I'm sure he is. Oh, Roy, if you only knew what trouble he's brought into our home! Poor dad and mother are all broken up over it. They had worked so hard to save their money, and now to see it all go like that——"

She stopped, her lips quivering, and fumbled in her bag for her handkerchief.

"There, there, now, Maizie," said Roy, patting her arm consolingly. "Don't believe that the money's

gone. I'm sure there are ways of getting it back and I'm going to do all I can to help."

"Oh, Roy, if you only could!"

"You can help me if you will. Make a copy of that contract, won't you? An exact copy, mind you, with every dot and comma just as it is in the original and let me have it. That is, if your father won't mind."

"He'll be only too glad to have you get it," declared Maizie. "He thinks you're wonderful after the work you did in the Grigg and the Boxwell cases. I'll make the copy to-night and give it to you to-morrow morning."

"That'll be great," replied Roy. "Now you just chirk up. If I catch you crying again there'll be some more of that cave-man stuff."

All the same, he wondered as he walked home that evening after leaving Maizie at her door what he had let himself in for. He had pledged himself to do something. But what? John Brackenbone would prove a formidable antagonist. He had money and influence. He seemed to have no scruples and was accustomed to ride roughshod over everyone who stood in his way.

Yet Goliath had been accustomed to do the same thing. And David had conquered him with his sling. Still David had had his sling. What sling could Roy Stover use against John Brackenbone? And when he had found a weapon, how best could he use it? Where was the weak spot in Brackenbone's armor?

Roy was deeply pondering these things when he reached home. His mother met him at the door.

"You poor boy!" she exclaimed, when she saw his rumpled clothes. "Out in the rain all day! It's a wonder you don't catch your death."

"I'm all right, Mother," laughed Roy, as he returned her kiss. "It would take an ax to kill me. My, but that supper smells good! What I'll do to that will be a crime. I'll just run up and change and be right down."

"Don't be too long," urged his mother. "Everything's ready to be put right on the table."

Roy promised and kept his word. When he came down to the dining room he found Joe Williamson there as a guest. Mr. Stover was at a commercial banquet downtown.

Joe was engaged to marry Roy's sister, and the wedding was to take place shortly. He was a fine, upstanding fellow, and a warm friendship existed between Roy and his future brother-in-law.

Nell, flushed and rosy, as pretty as a picture, greeted her brother with a kiss and Joe and Roy shook hands heartily.

"Behold the hero of the fire!" laughed Joe, as they seated themselves at the table.

Mrs. Stover looked up quickly.

"I hope, Roy, you haven't been taking risks again!" she exclaimed.

Nell smiled mockingly.

"Joe's just having his little joke, Mother," replied Roy, as he prepared to carve the roast. "There wasn't any hero stuff at that fire."

"How about taking motorboats out that might have blown up any minute?" asked Joe.

"Oh, that was nothing," replied Roy. "They didn't blow up, did they?"

"No," admitted Joe, "or you wouldn't be here this minute. But it was a plucky thing to do, just the same."

"Pluck is Roy's middle name," put in Nell proudly. "He's proved it again and again."

"You're just kidding me now to get the best piece of meat," declared Roy laughingly.

"It was a pretty bad fire," commented Joe. "Does Raymond stand to lose much, do you think, Roy?"

"No; he's pretty well covered by insurance. There'll be some individual losses, though, to the owners of the boats unless they, too, had insurance."

"Brackenbone's yacht was injured, I hear, more than any of the others," observed Joe. "Not that I'm shedding any bitter tears over that."

"You don't seem to like his nibs overmuch," remarked Roy, as he served the last plate.

"Who does?" returned Joe. "I think he's the most universally detested man in town."

"I've had some experiences to-day that show he's not what you could call exactly popular," said Roy, and went on to relate the incidents bearing on the relation of Mr. Lawrence and Mr. Raymond to Brackenbone.

His audience listened intently with many expressions of indignation.

"Poor Mr. Lawrence!" exclaimed Mrs. Stover.

"And Mrs. Lawrence, too! And Maizie! Think of the misery that rascal's brought upon them!"

"It's a burning shame," declared Nell warmly.

"What's your own special grievance against Brackebone, Joe?" asked Roy. "I gathered you had one from the way you spoke."

"Not my grievance personally, but that of the Eagle Lake Steamship Company," replied Joe, referring to the company with which he was connected. "They were all set to buy Cliff Island up near the head of the lake when he cheated them out of it by a shady trick. I'm not familiar with the exact details, but I know it was a shyster deal. Our people were foaming at the mouth about it."

"Can you get me all the facts?" asked Roy eagerly.

"Sure I can. But why?"

"Because," said Roy emphatically, "I'm going to try to put John Brackebone out of business!"

CHAPTER V

TAKING CHANCES

THERE was dead silence for a moment after the young reporter's declaration as the three others stared at Roy Stover in wonderment.

"It's a pretty big contract," said Joe Williamson, shaking his head dubiously. "Not but what it ought to be done. A man like that is a menace to the community. But he's a dangerous fighter to stack up against. He has loads of money and probably a whole army of lawyers. He'd lead you a merry dance before you downed him. He'd even have no scruples about resorting to personal violence. He's bad through and through."

"Oh, Roy, do be careful!" exclaimed Mrs. Stover. "If anything should happen to you—" she pressed her hand against her heart.

"I don't really see why you should mix in it," put in Nell, fearful for her brother's safety. "He hasn't done anything to you personally. Why not leave it to the Lawrences and the Raymonds to settle their own grievances against Brackenbone?"

"You might have said that about Grigg," parried

Roy. "He hadn't done anything to me personally. It might have been argued that that matter belonged to the police and that it was up to me and everybody else to stand aside. But suppose I had. Grigg would have got away with the loot and the people of Lakeport would have been out four hundred thousand dollars."

"Roy's dead right there," put in Joe Williamson.

"You see, Sis," Roy went on, "it's a little different with a newspaper man than with anyone else. The newspaper is supposed to be a sort of guardian of the community. The people come to rely upon it for protection. A newspaper, for one thing, has more facilities than anyone else for finding out things. It's its business to find out things. And when it's found them out and they're things that threaten the peace or happiness of the community it's supposed to make them public. It would be false to the trust people put in it if it didn't. Now I've found out several things to-day that surprise and disturb me. It's my business to follow the matter up."

"I'll tell you what," suggested Joe. "Why wouldn't it be a good thing to go over and have a personal interview with Brackenbone? He'd probably throw you out of the house, but something he might let fall would perhaps give you a tip that might be worth something."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Roy, as he mulled the matter over in his mind. "I'd have plenty of plausible reasons for doing it. I could ask for an expression of

his views of the real estate situation in general without mentioning any of his individual schemes. Or I could ask what his insurance was on his boat, whether he planned to rebuild it, and so on. Oh, it would be easy enough. I'll put it up to Gardner in the morning and see what he says about it."

The young reporter had little difficulty the next day in gaining the desired permission from the managing editor. He did not tell Gardner any of the reasons he had for suspecting Brackenbone of fraud. He was not ready for that yet. He dwelt instead on Brackenbone's eminence in the real estate world and the value to the *Eagle* of the views of so important a personage in its columns, and carried his point in that way.

"Did you make that copy, Maizie?" asked Roy, as he passed through the outside office.

"Catch me not doing it," replied Maizie, handing over a folded paper. "And, oh, Roy, you can't imagine the difference what you said to me last night made in our home. Mother was all smiles at the breakfast table and dad was actually humming a tune, the first time he's done that in months."

"I'm mighty glad, Maizie," replied Roy. "But don't get your hopes raised too high. I haven't the least idea yet of what I can do. I only know that I'm going to try to do something."

More determined than ever to justify the faith that the Lawrence family placed in him, Roy climbed into his car and drove over to the Brackenbone home which lay on the outskirts of a town about eight miles away.

It was a beautiful day after the storm, but Roy Stover had no eyes for nature's charms just then. He was too deeply engrossed in the perplexing problem that lay before him.

He found the residence of Brackenbone without difficulty. It was a large, pretentious house in the midst of capacious grounds.

"Wonder if that, too, was built with other people's money?" Roy asked himself, as he went up on the front porch and rang the bell.

He knew that Brackenbone was a widower and that his household was presided over by his daughter, Miss Amanda Brackenbone.

Miss Brackenbone herself, a gaunt, rawboned woman of perhaps thirty years of age, opened the door and regarded the visitor with a stony glance.

Roy removed his hat.

"Good morning" he began.

"I don't want any books," said Miss Brackenbone, making as though to close the door.

"Just a minute, please," interposed Roy. "I——"

"Nor radios, nor vacuum cleaners, nor anything else," went on the woman. "You people bother the life out of me. Go away."

"I haven't a thing to sell," stated Roy. "I'm a reporter for the Lakeport *Eagle*."

The woman relaxed somewhat her militant attitude.

"Well, what do you want?" she asked ungraciously.

"My paper sent me over to get an interview with Mr. Brackenbone," explained Roy. "Is he at home?"

"No, he isn't."

"Can you tell me when he will be in?"

"No."

"Has he gone out of town?"

"No."

"Then in all probability he'll be in soon," said Roy.

"Do you mind if I come in and wait?"

The woman eyed him frigidly.

"What do you want to see him for?"

"To get an interview for my paper."

"What about?"

"The present outlook of real estate."

"Can't you people guess it as well as anyone else?"

"That's just the trouble," replied Roy. "Anyone can guess, but it takes an expert to know. Mr. Brackbone's views would be of value because of his prominence in the real estate field."

The woman considered for a moment.

"I don't know that he'd care to see you," she said.

"He thinks newspaper people are nuisances."

"No doubt they are, sometimes," agreed Roy with a smile. "But I'll try to be an exception. I won't detain him long."

"Well, you can come in," said the woman reluctantly. "But it won't do you any good. He'll probably refuse to talk to you. No, not in there," she said sharply, as Roy was about to enter the living room. "Sit on this bench," indicating a seat in the hall.

Without excusing herself, she left him abruptly and went to the rear of the house.

"Gee, what a frost!" murmured Roy to himself amusedly. "I could feel myself getting chilblains."

Roy had been sitting on the bench for perhaps twenty minutes when he heard a car come up the driveway and stop at the back.

"That's probably his nibs now," he thought. "Hope he's in a more amiable mood than his charming daughter."

He heard the back door slam and the sound of voices in conversation.

"He's getting the bad news now," said Roy to himself.

"Why didn't you slam the door in his face?" he heard in a gruff voice which he recognized as that of Brackenbone.

"Sounds encouraging," muttered Roy.

He did not hear the answer, but a moment later the door into the hall was flung open and Brackenbone stamped in.

"What do you want?" the man asked abruptly.

"My name is Stover," said Roy rising. "I——"

"I don't care what your name is," snapped Brackenbone. "What did you come here for?"

"To interview you on the real estate situation on behalf of the Lakeport *Eagle*," replied Roy.

"One of those newspaper guys, eh?" snarled Brackenbone. "I haven't any use for them. I haven't anything to say to the newspapers. There's the door."

"But, Mr. Brackenbone——" protested Roy.

"There's the door, I say," roared Brackenbone.

"Are you going out now or shall I be compelled to throw you——"

He stopped abruptly as the light fell more clearly on the face of the young reporter.

"Say," he exclaimed, his tone changing, "aren't you the young fellow that was at Casey's roadhouse yesterday?"

CHAPTER VI

ON THE TRAIL

ROY STOVER was quick to notice the irate man's change of tone.

"Yes," he said, "I was there."

Brackenbone seemed to consider for a moment.

"You saw that fellow fly at my throat," he said.

"You know that he was to blame."

"I saw that both of you had lost your tempers," replied Roy evasively.

"Not I," declared Brackenbone virtuously. "I was just arguing peaceably enough and trying to make him see reason, and before I knew it he was at me. I ought to have smashed him," he added viciously. He seemed to have forgotten Roy's part in the affair.

"He seemed to be pretty sore at you for something," remarked Roy, watching Brackenbone's face.

"Just one of the soreheads that a business man runs up against every once in a while," was the reply. "He didn't have any real grievance."

"He seemed to think differently," observed Roy. "He was telling me all about it on the way home."

"On the way home," repeated Brackenbone quickly. "What do you mean by that?"

"I had my car there," answered Roy, "and as he's a neighbor of mine I gave him a lift."

"So he talked to you, did he?" asked Brackenbone. "Filled you up with a lot of guff, I suppose."

"He told me his side of the story," corrected Roy.

"And what was that?"

"That he had let you have three thousand dollars on your representation that you were going to develop a tract of real estate in which he would have a share of the profits."

"Well, what's the matter with that?" challenged Brackenbone. "That's perfectly legitimate, isn't it?"

"Yes, if it's carried out in good faith," agreed Roy. "But that's what he claimed hasn't been done. That was two years ago, and he says that nothing has been done in the way of development and there's no sign of any action in prospect."

"That's all the pinhead knows about it," snorted Brackenbone. "I've been doing a lot of things in preparation for opening up the tract."

"As for instance?" suggested Roy.

"Why—er—why—" the big man's face became congested. "What's that to you?" he burst out furiously. "Have I got to tell my plans to every impudent jackanapes that sticks his nose into my business?"

"You don't have to, but it might be to your advantage to if everything is straight and above board," responded Roy calmly. "There are a lot of people

in Lakeport, I believe, that you have interested in your proposition. There's Victor Lawrence, Nicholas Raymond——"

Brackenbone fairly foamed at the mouth.

"Look here, what is this, anyway, a holdup?" he roared. "Blackmail? Get out of my house before I kick you out."

"I wouldn't try that if I were you," said Roy, picking up his hat. "No one yet has ever got away with it."

He went out and down the steps.

"And if you ever show your face here again I'll set the dogs on you," Brackenbone flung after him before he closed the door with a bang.

"A hard-boiled egg, if there ever was one!" Roy muttered to himself, as he climbed into his car.

He had some trouble getting the car started, and before he had succeeded the door again opened and Brackenbone came out on the porch.

Roy thought for a moment that the man projected violence, and his muscles tensed. But it was quite a different Brackenbone who came down the steps and approached the car.

"Look here, young fellow," he said, trying to summon up a smile that sat queerly on his ugly face, "forget what I said just now. There's no use in printing anything about this talk of ours. People might get a wrong impression. I'm hot tempered and say more than I mean. Leave me out of the paper altogether. And to show you that I'm a good fellow—just what salary do you get from the *Eagle*?"

"Enough," answered Roy shortly.

"Well, a young fellow can always use more," went on Brackenbone, "and if fifty dollars—" he put his hand in his pocket.

"Keep your hand right there, Mr. Brackenbone," commanded Roy contemptuously. "I'm not for sale. Good morning."

"Wait a minute, young fellow! Wait a minute! This may be worth real money to you."

Roy gave Brackenbone a cold look.

"Didn't I tell you that I'm not for sale?"

"But fifty dollars isn't picked up every day. Besides that," went on the man ingratiatingly, "I might make it a little more."

"I'm not going to stay here to be insulted," burst out Roy, his indignation increasing.

"But, oh, you don't understand," went on Brackenbone. "You're going to get things all balled up, and then——"

"I understand only too well, and that's the end of it for me."

"But give me a chance——"

"Not another word! Good morning," was Roy's short reply.

He started the car and whirled out of the gate, not glancing back at a face convulsed with evil passions.

The young reporter had plenty to ponder over as he drove back to Lakeport. His conviction had deepened that Brackenbone was a rascal. That stuttering inability to tell what he had done in the way of de-

velopment! That clumsy attempt at bribery! Everything about the man was rank with bad faith.

Still this was only his personal conviction. That was very different from evidence that would convince a jury.

One thing was clear. Brackenbone had a deadly fear of publicity. His rage had blinded him to that for a moment, but he had changed quickly when he reflected on what the young reporter might put in the newspaper.

Yet why should any honest man fear publicity?

Despite his ferocity, there was a streak of yellow in Brackenbone. Roy remembered how quickly Brackenbone had got out of the roadhouse when Lawrence started to denounce him; how he had wilted when Nicholas Raymond turned upon him.

Why? Because he lived in fear, because his dealings would not stand the light.

All the more reason, Roy thought, why the light should be turned on John Brackenbone.

He reached the *Eagle* building, but instead of reporting directly to Gardner he turned into his father's private office. Mr. Stover looked up as Roy entered.

"Hello, Son," he greeted him genially. "Missed seeing you last night because I was so late at the banquet and you beat me out this morning. Where have you come from?"

"Been over having an interview with Brackenbone," replied Roy, as he seated himself.

"Ah, the real estate man," remarked Mr. Stover.

"Biggest realtor we have in this section. Well, did he give you anything worth while?"

"Told me if I didn't get out of the house he'd kick me out," and Roy grinned.

Mr. Stover straightened up in his chair with a jerk.

"What on earth made him say that?" he exclaimed.

"I hope you weren't impudent to him."

"The impudence was mostly on his side," returned Roy, with a smile. "Dad, that man is a thorough-paced rascal, and you ought to expose him in the columns of the *Eagle*."

Mr. Stover looked at his son in stark surprise.

"Do you realize that that is a very serious charge you are making?" he asked gravely.

"Yes," admitted Roy. "But I'm not talking through my hat. I have grounds for believing so."

"I've known him for some time and I've never heard anything against his reputation," said Mr. Stover.

"That was true of Lemuel Grigg until he was found out," Roy reminded him. "Every man has a good reputation until it cracks. Brackenbone has been working like a mole underground. It's high time he was dug out from his hole."

"Now let's get down to brass tacks," said Mr. Stover. "Tell me not what you guess but what you know."

"All right," said Roy. "Here goes."

He started with the fracas in the roadhouse and told of his conversation with Victor Lawrence on the way back to Lakeport.

Mr. Stover listened intently, at first with some incredulity that gradually disappeared as fact after fact was unfolded. Before Roy had finished the father interrupted him.

"Wait a minute," he said. "I'd like to have Gardner hear this."

He opened the door and called the managing editor.

"Busy, Gardner?" he said. "Would you mind coming in here for a little conference?"

Gardner came in.

"Would you mind closing the door behind you?" asked Mr. Stover. "This is something for your private ear."

Gardner did so and sat down.

"Roy has unearthed something about Brackenbone that doesn't sound good," explained Mr. Stover. "Start over again, Roy, and tell Mr. Gardner what you've told me."

Gardner grunted rather unbelievably, but settled himself to listen. As Roy repeated his story about Lawrence the managing editor's air of boredom vanished.

"So that's the plight that Mr. Lawrence is in," Roy concluded. "His three thousand dollars is gone and he sees no chance of getting action for his money. As far as he can see, Brackenbone can hold it all his life and Mr. Lawrence has no comeback."

Mr. Stover and Gardner looked at each other.

"Looks rather bad, don't you think so, Gardner?" the former asked.

"It does," admitted Gardner. "Still, there may be another side of the story. There may be some real and legitimate reasons why Brackenbone hasn't been able to start the development yet."

"He said he had this morning," replied Roy. "But when I asked him to name just one of them he stuttered, hemmed and hawed, and then covered up his confusion by flying into a passion and ordering me out of the house."

"That might have been merely resentment at having his good faith called in question," observed Gardner. "But, after all, in what way does this concern us? This is just an isolated case. Lawrence is a grown man and is supposed to know what he signs. There's the old maxim, 'Let the buyer beware.' I'm sorry for Lawrence, but if he's been wronged he has his redress in the courts."

"But it isn't an isolated case," replied Roy. "I think Nicholas Raymond has been stung in the same way," and he went on to tell of Raymond's stormy talk with Brackenbone regarding a certain real estate transaction.

"Afterward in talking with me, Mr. Raymond said that Brackenbone was getting 'suckers' money, fools' money,'" Roy expanded his story. "I think he was caught in the same way that Mr. Lawrence was. And Mr. Lawrence, though he didn't mention other names, told me there were others in Lakeport that were in the same net."

"That puts a different aspect on the matter," said

Mr. Stover gravely. "If there's widespread swindling going on in the community, it's a public duty to expose it. Don't you think so, Gardner?"

"Y-e-s," admitted Gardner reluctantly. "But only when we're absolutely sure of the facts. It would be the easiest thing in the world for us to find ourselves with a libel suit on our hands. Brackenbone has money and influence and he'd use them without stint. Lawrence may have misread this contract he talks about. I'd like to see a copy of it."

"That's easy," replied Roy, drawing the paper from his pocket. "Here's a copy that I asked Maizie to make last night. She tells me it's absolutely exact to the dotting of an i and the crossing of a t."

"You're a fast worker, Roy," said his father approvingly, as he spread the paper out and began to read.

His brow clouded as he studied some of the clauses.

"Smooth as oil, but crooked as a corkscrew," he remarked, as he tossed it to his managing editor. "Read that, Gardner, and tell me if it doesn't fairly smell of fraud."

"Right you are," agreed Gardner, after reading it carefully. "Infernally cunning, but the joker is there just the same. The wonder is to me that any intelligent man would sign such a thing."

"The answer is that they depended on Brackenbone's reputation," replied Roy. "Look at a fire insurance policy. After the main statement there follow a dozen or more clauses in fine print by which the

company protects itself against carelessness or negligence on the part of the holder. How many people read those clauses word for word? Not one in a hundred. They have confidence in the company, read over the big print, and let it go at that. Honest, Dad, have you ever waded through every word of fine print in your insurance policy?"

Mr. Stover smiled a bit sheepishly.

"I don't believe I ever did," he admitted.

"There's the answer," replied Roy. "We mustn't be too hard on Mr. Lawrence and the others. They've been trapped by a cunning swindler. Is the *Eagle* going to stand by and let him get away with it?"

CHAPTER VII

PICKING UP CLUES

FOR several minutes Mr. Stover made no answer to his son's question. He was pondering deeply.

He had all of a trained newspaper man's caution and conservatism. He knew how easily he might find himself and his paper in serious trouble if he made any premature statement or even hint that he could not back up with indisputable facts.

He knew, too, how sensitive and delicate a thing was a business man's reputation. The least breath of suspicion blowing upon it might destroy it. It would be a cruel and wicked thing if the suspicion were baseless, and he did not want to do a possible injustice to Brackenbone or anybody else.

On the other hand, he felt keenly his duty to the community. He could not stand by supinely and let worthy and honest people be robbed of their savings by a cunning scoundrel.

"You ask, Roy," he said at last, "whether the *Eagle* was going to let Brackenbone get away with it. My answer is no!"

"Bully for you, Dad!" cried Roy delightedly.

Mr. Stover held up his hand.

"Wait a minute," he said. "The *Eagle* isn't going to let Brackenbone get away with it if—mark that if—he's guilty. But I must have more evidence than you have yet presented to be positive that he's guilty."

Roy looked crestfallen.

"Looks like an open and shut case to me," he muttered. "You said yourself that the contract was as crooked as a corkscrew."

"So it is, as far as my personal conviction is concerned," replied his father. "But you don't suppose for a moment, do you, that Brackenbone hasn't considered that that clause might be called in question and have an answer ready for it?"

"Sure," put in Gardner. "He'd probably say that he never intended to take advantage of it except in case some impatient investor should try to hurry him into some foolish or ill-judged action, and a jury might believe him. There's no telling what a jury might decide upon."

"Exactly," said Mr. Stover. "Now I'll tell you what we'll do. I want you, Roy, to gather up all the loose ends in this matter that you can. Get Lawrence to give you the names of any others in Lakeport and the vicinity who have gone into this special scheme of Brackenbone's. Interview those people, but do it very discreetly. Don't get them into a panic. Don't make them think you're prying into their private affairs. Don't suggest there's anything wrong. Don't mention Brackenbone's name. Just drop into casual chat about

real estate in general, and likely enough they'll mention their own investment. Follow up the Raymond matter and see what you get. Elmer perhaps can help you in that."

"I'm sure he will," replied Roy. "He's as sore as the mischief at Brackenbone."

"Get all the facts you can and let us have them," said Mr. Stover. "We'll mull them over and lay them before our lawyer. Then, if the proof is conclusive, the *Eagle* will put a spoke in John Brackenbone's wheel."

"Fine!" exclaimed Roy. "Watch my smoke!"

"I'd give Roy a free hand in this for the next few days," Mr. Stover suggested to his managing editor. "Let him come and go as he thinks best. If we find that things are all right, there's no harm done. If they're all wrong, the sooner we know it the better. If it really is a swindle, the exposure will be a big scoop for the *Eagle*, apart from the benefit it will be to the people of Lakeport."

Gardner agreed and Roy left the office, filled with enthusiasm at having carried his point. In the outer office he stopped for a minute at Maizie's desk.

"I've got them going," he said in a half whisper. "Dad and Gardner are all stirred up over it, and I'm going after Brackenbone for all that I'm worth."

Maizie paused in her typewriting.

"That's fine!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining. "If you only do it, Roy, I'll be the happiest girl in Lakeport."

"But mum's the word," cautioned Roy. "Don't speak of it outside of your own family. I don't want Brackenbone to get an inkling of it. I don't want the *News* to get on to it, either. If there's any newspaper benefit in this, I want it to be all for the *Eagle*."

"Trust me," promised Maizie.

In the street Roy ran into Hen Feley, the fat, chunky reporter for the *News*. Between the two, as between their respective papers, a keen rivalry existed. Feley was considerably older than Roy and had been in the newspaper business a number of years.

When Roy had started out as a cub, Feley had viewed him with a sort of amused tolerance and treated him in a patronizing way. There was nothing to be apprehended in the newsgathering field from a callow young stripling barely out of high school.

But it was not long before Feley had to open his eyes. This young cub, after all, had something in him. He was a rival not to be despised. Roy had a nose like that of a bloodhound for news. And after getting it, he had a facility in making it interesting in the telling that was far ahead of Feley's rather heavy style.

Feley had had to take many a raking from his chiefs because he had let Roy get ahead of him. Naturally, this was not pleasant. Still, Feley was not a bad fellow, and he and Roy, outside of their professional rivalry, were friendly enough.

"Hello, Hen," called Roy, with a grin. "How's that reptile sheet of yours getting along?"

"Still able to sit up and take nourishment," replied Feley, in the same bantering tone. "Husky enough to pluck a few feathers from the *Eagle* once in a while."

"Is that so?" replied Roy, in feigned alarm. "I hadn't noticed any robbery of that kind going on."

"You'll notice it when you get your eyes open," retorted Feley. "All kittens are blind for a few days after their birth, you know."

"My youth is a handicap," admitted Roy sadly. "But it will wear off after a while. Then I'll be able to pick up an item occasionally that will justify the princely salary I'm getting."

"You sure are gypping them now," declared Feley. "I suppose you get by because your father's the boss. Well, so long, old man. Got to be going."

Roy made at once for Mr. Lawrence's place of business. The latter greeted him cordially.

"Hello, Roy," he said, as he shook hands. "Glad to see you. Maizie was telling me of the interest you were taking in that Brackenbone matter. It's mighty good of you. Did you look over that copy of the contract?"

"I did, and I think it's rotten."

"That's the only name for it," agreed Mr. Lawrence sadly.

"I showed it to my father and Mr. Gardner," went on Roy. "They feel the same way about it. They've given me a free hand to investigate the whole matter and I want you to help me."

"Will I?" cried Mr. Lawrence emphatically. "Will a duck swim?"

"You want to keep the thing under your hat," Roy cautioned him. "We don't want Brackenbone to get wind of it until we're ready to shoot. You said the other day that there were plenty of others besides yourself in Lakeport who had been stung by Brackenbone in the same way you were. I'd like to have you give me the names of them so that I can know whom to interview. Of course, I'll do the whole thing in a cautious way and your name won't be mentioned."

Mr. Lawrence complied, and by the time Roy had jotted the names down he found that there were as many as a dozen on his list.

"Phew!" Roy exclaimed. "This thing is more widespread than I thought. Brackenbone has sure been making hay while the sun shone!"

"Those are only the ones I know," Lawrence reminded him. "There may be dozens of others that I haven't heard about. Oh, that fellow's an artist in his way. I hope you lay him by the heels, Roy."

"If I don't, it won't be for want of trying," promised Roy, as he hurried off.

The next few days were busy ones for Roy Stover.

Not a name on his list did he overlook. He visited the homes of all of the men mentioned or chatted with them when he met them on the street. He was well liked by the people of the town and easily fell into casual conversation with them.

In every case he steered the conversation casually

in the direction of real estate. Some of the more close-mouthed did not refer at all to investments of their own, and Roy did not press them. But the majority, soon or late, mentioned that they had taken a little flier in Brackenbone's offerings.

There was surprisingly little apprehension shown. Brackenbone's reputation for handling big deals stood him in good stead. Occasionally some surprise was expressed that the development had not yet taken place. Some said that they had spoken to Brackenbone about it but that he had satisfactorily explained the delay. They were sure he knew more about the right time for beginning it than they did. Only one expressed some suspicion akin to that of Mr. Lawrence's.

Roy was appalled at the magnitude of the thing. Even with that dozen or so, the amount of their investments, as nearly as he could calculate, totaled over thirty thousand dollars. And, as Mr. Lawrence had said, there might be dozens of others in the same boat. Roy could foresee untold misery in many Lakeport households if the matter should prove to be a swindle.

That it was a swindle he felt morally certain, and his heart grew hot with indignation.

He had been following up the matter for several days when one morning he had a telephone call from Joe Williamson.

"Hello, Roy," said Joe. "Busy?"

"A pretty question to ask a reporter, the most

downtrodden wage slave in the universe," replied Roy.

"Yes, to let you tell it," jeered Joe. "I'll bet that when I called you you had your feet on the desk and were dreaming the happy hours away. But listen, Roy. I have news for you, big news."

"That's what they all say," replied Roy. "I suppose Si Hawkins has just given his barn a new coat of paint."

"Cut out the spoofing," commanded Joe. "This is really big. Something about a fellow whose name begins with B. Come up right away."

Roy was alert in an instant.

"I get you," he said. "I'll be up as fast as my old bus can bring me."

CHAPTER VIII

HARD TO FIND

IN TWO minutes after he had hung up the phone Roy Stover had dashed down the stairs, jumped into his car, and was speeding toward the offices of the Eagle Lake Steamship Company, the concern with which Joe Williamson was connected.

He reached there in a fast sprint and was shown at once into Joe's office.

"I thought I'd bring you running," said Joe, as he and his prospective brother-in-law shook hands.

"You were a good guesser," replied Roy, as he flung himself into a chair. "Now open up, old man, and let me see just how big your news is. Of course, by 'B' you meant Brackenbone."

"No one else but," agreed Joe. "I just got on to a number of facts about the fellow that I felt sure would stir you up, knowing how you've been on his trail for the last week or so."

"Spill it," urged Roy. "What's the news and whom did you get it from?"

"The news is that Brackenbone is about to crash," replied Joe.

"You mean go bankrupt?" asked Roy, with startled interest.

"I suppose it will end in that," was the answer. "That is, if his creditors find anything to levy on. But the old rascal has got to the end of his rope and the chances are that he's planning to skip out with all the cash he can lay his hands on."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Roy. "Where did you get your information?"

"From a fellow named Alston," replied Joe. "I've known him more or less well for a couple of years past. He's been a sort of confidential secretary to Brackenbone and knows his affairs better than anyone except the old man himself. He stopped in a little while ago, just before taking the train for New York."

"He's broken with Brackenbone, then?" asked Roy.

"Good and plenty," answered Joe. "They've had a bitter quarrel, and Brackenbone so far forgot himself as to use his fists. That settled it with Alston. He carries a black eye now as a witness to the fight. He cleared out bag and baggage. He's as sore as the mischief at Brackenbone. I joked him about his black eye and that started him to talking. Seemed to sort of relieve his mind."

"Just what did he say?" queried Roy.

"Said that Brackenbone was just hanging on by his eyelids and might come a cropper any minute," was the reply. "He's been in a tight place for the last year or two. He's collected a lot of money from other people on the promise of investing it in his develop-

ments. But he hasn't invested it. Instead, he's laid it aside, preparing, so Alston said, to disappear when things became too hot for him. Lately some of his dupes have been asking him pressing questions and beginning to get nasty. Alston has noted certain things that made him feel sure that Brackenbone was on the edge of skipping out."

"Gee, I wish I could see Alston!" exclaimed Roy. "You say he's already gone?"

"To New York," replied Joe. "Left on the train a few minutes ago."

"Did he leave any address in New York?" pursued Roy.

"Didn't know himself where he'd stop," was the answer.

"That's maddening," declared Roy in vexation. "I'd give a hundred dollars right now for ten minutes' talk with him."

"Well, that chance has gone," replied Joe. "He'll be swallowed up in the big city."

"Do you think he was telling you the truth?" asked Roy. "Or was he just sore at Brackenbone on account of that black eye and trying to injure him by making up the story?"

"That last, of course, is possible," admitted Joe. "But I don't think he was romancing. I thought he was telling the truth. He was mad, of course, but there seemed to be sincerity in everything he said."

Roy Stover pondered for a moment.

"Thanks very much, Joe," he said, rising.

"Going so soon?"

"Got to. I mustn't let any grass grow under my car. I'm going over to see Brackenbone."

"And get a black eye of your own?" asked Joe, grinning.

"Perhaps," laughed Roy. "He threatened to kick me out the last time I was there. But that cuts no ice. I learned some things that time and I may learn more now. Good-by, old boy. Thanks for the information. I'm off."

Roy jumped into his car and threw in the clutch. He had gone but a few blocks when he caught sight of Elmer Raymond. Elmer waved to him and Roy drew up at the curb.

"Hello, Elmer," called Roy. "Especially busy?"

"Not overwhelmed with work. Business is rather quiet at the dock while the repairs are being made."

"Jump in, then, and get a ride in the fresh air that will drive the cobwebs from your brain."

"I'm with you," said Elmer, suiting the action to the word, "though I don't like that intimation that there are cobwebs in my belfry. Still, you are admitting that I have a brain, which is something. Where are you going?"

"Over to Brackenbone's place, about eight miles from here."

"What are you going to see that old geezer about?"

"Oh, a number of things," answered Roy evasively. "By the way, Elmer, is your father as sore at Brackenbone as he was the day of the fire at the dock?"

"And then some," was the answer. "Dad is out for Brackenbone's scalp. He has fire in his eye every time he hears his name mentioned."

"Business trouble?" asked Roy carelessly.

"Yes," replied Elmer. "He got into dad's pocket to the extent of about five thousand dollars."

"That's a heap of money," commented Roy.

"Dad says he might as well have thrown it to the birds," declared Elmer. "Says he never expects to get a sniff of it again. But if he can't get the money, he's going to get satisfaction."

"How?" queried Roy. "By thrashing Brackenbone?"

"By having him arrested as a fraud," replied Elmer.

"That's interesting," said Roy. "It would certainly stir up a sensation in Lakeport. Has he taken any steps toward it?"

"Not definite ones. But it's only the fire that has held him off this long. He saw Brackenbone a couple of days ago and told him what he could expect unless he came across."

Roy remembered Alston's statement that certain of Brackenbone's dupes were "turning nasty." Had he had Nicholas Raymond in mind among others?

"Looks as though the place were deserted," remarked Elmer, when, a few minutes later, they reached the Brackenbone estate.

"It does, for a fact," agreed Roy, as he noted that all the shutters were tightly closed. Had the bird already flown?

The young reporter climbed out of the car and went up on the front porch.

"If you need any help, yell for it," said Elmer, grinning.

"All right," laughed Roy.

He rang the bell and waited. No one came to the door.

Roy noted a folded newspaper that had been thrown up on the porch. He opened it and looked at the date. It was of that day. The fact that it had not been taken in showed that Brackenbone must have left very early that morning or possibly on the day before.

When repeated ringing failed to bring any response, Roy went around to the back door. There he found a chunk of ice wasting away and a full bottle of milk.

He knocked sharply on the back door without result. Unless someone were wilfully refraining from answering the summons, the house was empty.

Puzzled and disconcerted, the young reporter went back to where Elmer was waiting in the car.

"Any luck?" queried Elmer.

"Not a bit," replied Roy. "Dead as a tomb."

"What are you going to do?" asked Elmer.

"Stroll round the grounds," was the answer. "I may find someone on the place who can give me the information I want."

The grounds were extensive, and for a time Roy wandered around without catching a glimpse of anyone. He was about to give up when, in a remote cor-

ner of the grounds, he descried an old Negro clearing out some weeds from a flower bed.

"Hello, Uncle," Roy hailed him. "Busy, I see."

"Tol'able busy, sah," replied the old fellow. "Dese pesky weeds shuah am a heap o' trouble."

"I dropped over to see Mr. Brackenbone, but nobody seems to be at home," remarked Roy.

"No, sah, dey's gone," was the reply.

"Where have they gone?" asked Roy.

Miss 'Manda she gone to New Yawk."

"Did Mr. Brackenbone go with her?" queried Roy.

"Ah doan' know zac'ly. Heerd him sayin' somethin' 'bout goin' to his lodge on Cliff Island when he was talkin' kind o' low-like to Miss 'Manda, but he didn't tell me nothin'. Seemed kind o' hurried-like."

"When did they go?"

"Miss 'Manda she go yes'day mornin'. De boss he go las' night."

"Didn't he leave you any directions?"

"No, sah, not so as you could say directions. He give me mah week's wages an' tole me to look for another job. Tole me to keep mah mouth shet if anybody come pryin' aroun'. Co'se he didn' mean talkin' to a nice young man like you, but to dem pesky repo'tahs, ah reckon."

"I guess that's what he had in mind," agreed Roy, with difficulty repressing a smile. "Well, I'm much obliged, Uncle. Here's a dollar for taking up your time," and he slipped a bill into the colored man's hand.

He left the old fellow bowing and scraping and went back to Elmer.

"Find out anything?" asked Elmer.

"Ran across an old colored man whose ideas were very vague," replied Roy, as he jumped in and started the car. "They went away yesterday, and the daughter at least has gone to New York. I'll have to see Brackenbone some other time."

He designedly changed the subject, because he wanted to keep the matter to himself until he had gone over it thoroughly in his own mind. The mention of Cliff Island had put an idea into his mind. Before him loomed visions of that dearest of all things to a reporter's heart, a "scoop."

Where was John Brackenbone? Roy Stover had a notion that he knew.

CHAPTER IX

CLIFF ISLAND

"I've a few hours start of Hen Feley, anyway," Roy Stover thought exultantly as he drove along. "Thanks to Joe Williamson and that colored man, I've a little inside information that should see me far on my way before Hen or the other news hounds find out there's anything unusual afoot. Now for the office and then for Cliff Island!"

They reached the *Eagle* building and Roy jumped out.

"Wait for me here a minute, Elmer," he said to his companion. "I'll be right out."

He went up the stairs two at a time. Gardner was out, but Mr. Stover was in his office. To his father Roy poured out what he had learned.

"I'm on the trail of a big thing, Dad," he said. "Don't worry if I'm not back to-night. I'll be here when I get here. Or I'll telephone in if anything breaks. Keep the presses open as late as possible. I've got to rush off now, as I can't lose a minute."

"All right, my boy," replied his father. "In the meantime, I'll have this stuff put into shape so that

we can use it instantly if necessary. But take good care of yourself."

"I will, Dad," Roy promised, as he rushed through the door.

He drove Elmer Raymond down to the dock, but instead of dropping him there and turning back, stepped out with him.

"Say, old boy, do me a favor, will you?" Roy asked.

"Sure thing. What is it?"

"Take me up the lake on an errand in your motor-boat."

"That isn't a favor, it's a pleasure. I'll get the old bus ready."

Little more was said until the boat had drawn free from the dock and was chug-chugging out into the open water.

"What'll I head for?" asked Elmer.

"Cliff Island. And make it snappy, will you, old boy. I'm in a hurry."

Elmer favored the young reporter with a curious, half-startled glance.

"Cliff Island? Of course I'll take you there, but what's the big idea?"

"I have to verify some news that I just got hold of," said Roy evasively. "And say, Elmer, is this the best your tub can do? I thought it was a speed boat," and Roy grinned.

Elmer snorted.

"Say, listen, old timer. If it's speed you're after, I aim to oblige. But don't sling any insults at the

boat. I'm afraid even our friendship can't stand the strain."

Elmer turned to the engine and the motorboat leaped ahead. For some time there was no sound but the sputtering of the engine and the swish of the water as it flashed past the boat.

Elmer brushed the spray from his face and grinned at Roy.

"Better?" he asked.

"Slick," returned Roy, with an answering grin.

Another short silence fell between the friends, and then Elmer said abruptly:

"I say, Roy, you don't want to go over to Cliff Island."

"Don't I?" asked Roy, surprised. "Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, it's got a blamed bad reputation. It's away off from everywhere, surrounded by water as it is."

"Islands are generally surrounded by water," Roy retorted.

"You know well enough what I mean. Cliff Island's a lonely place and there are stories about it."

"Yes, I've heard some of them," Roy admitted. "It's supposed to be inhabited by a wild man and the ghost of a dead hunter. You don't really expect me to be frightened away from the island by such yarns, do you?"

"Well, of course, the ghost is a get-up and the story about the wild man exaggerated. Just the same, where there's so much smoke there must be some fire.

Cliff Island strikes me as a dangerous place where no one would care to linger longer than he had to."

"Well, I won't," stated Roy. "With any sort of luck I should be able to get through my investigation to-day."

"I sure hope you haven't any idea of staying over night?"

"I'll stay there until I get what I'm after," declared Roy grimly.

Elmer grinned.

"There speaks the steely-eyed detective. I don't suppose you want to let me in on your inside info," he added a trifle wistfully.

Roy shook his head.

"Sorry, old man, but now isn't the time to talk. I'll tell you all about it afterwards."

"Sure, that's where I always come in—at the tail end," gloomed Elmer.

Cliff Island rose before them at last, its stark, ungracious outlines ruthlessly revealed by the mid-afternoon sun. It was long and narrow, heavily wooded, with a jagged, rocky shore line. At one point the flat surface was almost level with the water, but the rocky ground climbed steadily, ending in a line of rugged cliffs.

"Where do you want to land?" asked Elmer. "You can take your pick."

"Guess we'd better make for the lower end of the island," said Roy, who had no idea as to the exact location of Brackenbone's lodge. "Those cliffs

look formidable, even if they do have a landing beach at the foot of them."

Obligingly, Elmer turned the boat in the direction that Roy had indicated. He found an inlet where it was possible to make a landing and shoved the nose of the boat into the sand.

Roy Stover leaped on shore and surveyed the island questioningly. What did it hold for him?

"Rattlesnakes," said Elmer, as though answering his unspoken question. "The place is alive with them."

Roy looked interested. Here was something more tangible than mysterious wild men and the ghosts of departed hunters.

"That's one thing I hadn't heard about the island," he admitted. "Glad you told me, Elmer. I'll have to be on my guard."

"And then some. Do you want me to call back for you in a couple of hours."

Roy considered; then shook his head. His mission might take him only an hour or two; it might take much longer. No sense in making Elmer wait around for him.

"Thanks, old man, but I guess not. When I'm through here I'll hail some boat going down the lake and get a lift to the mainland."

Elmer departed reluctantly, and Roy Stover plunged into the woodland.

He found a faintly marked trail among the rocks and underbrush and, following this, climbed steadily.

He remembered Elmer's warning about rattlesnakes and kept a wary eye on the rocks and rotted stumps that beset his path.

Although he had laughed at the wild stories that had been circulated about Cliff Island, Roy Stover was aware of a growing uneasiness in himself as he penetrated farther into that lonely place.

He was at a loss to account for the feeling, since nothing so far had occurred to startle or alarm him. Nevertheless, he was aware that he did not like Cliff Island, was growing to dislike it more and more with every minute that passed.

He plodded on for some distance farther. Then he paused to reconnoiter.

He had heard of the old stone mansion on the island. It was common knowledge that Brackenbone had purchased the house with the island itself. If the Negro's surmise was to be trusted, it remained only for Roy to find the house. There he would also find Brackenbone.

"The problem is to find that old mansion," thought Roy. "I know nothing of the island, so it's probable that I landed at the point farthest from Brackenbone and his home."

The thought annoyed him, and he started forward again, determined to reach his objective with no waste of time. His newspaper experience had taught him that sometimes a brief few minutes made all the difference between finding the bird and finding that the bird had flown.

He had gone for some distance without sighting the house when he became aware of a distinct impression that someone was following him, was cautiously, furtively tracking him.

Roy's progress had been steadily upward through a tangle of underbrush. Before him lay a clearing, and he made for this, determined to force his lurking trailer into the open.

As he entered the clearing he heard a slight sound behind him and whirled about quickly.

He was just in time to see a figure dodge behind a rock!

CHAPTER X

THE WARNING RATTLE

ROY STOVER stood stock-still and stared at the rock.

He could not believe what his eyes had seen. The figure, glimpsed for a brief instant, was too fantastic to be true. The wild hair, streaming beard, and deep-set, staring eyes were the sort of thing one sees in dreams—bad dreams. Yet Roy Stover was very sure that he was awake.

For an instant the stories he had heard of Cliff Island flashed through his mind. The wild man—the ghost of the dead hunter!

“Nonsense!” Roy broke off in his thoughts. “That was no ghost, and if it was a wild man, then it’s high time he was tamed.”

All this flashed through the young reporter’s mind in the briefest fraction of a second. In reality, there was scarcely a pause between his first glimpse of the man and his leap toward the rock.

He covered the space in three rapid strides, his hand on the pistol that bulged in his pocket.

What was his amazement on reaching the rock to find that there was nobody behind it!

The fact, incredible as it seemed, was verified by a search of the neighboring trees and bushes. The fantastic figure of the man had disappeared without leaving a trace.

Roy Stover sat down on the rock and stared angrily about him.

"Somebody's playing a trick on me," he thought. "I'd like to get my hands on him. Now, just where did that old geezer go?"

It occurred to the youth that there might be a cave or shack or some other place of hiding in the neighborhood to which the mysterious pursuer had retreated. A brief but thorough search in the vicinity of the rock failed to reveal any such refuge, and Roy was thoroughly mystified.

"That old boy was no ghost," he muttered. "I'll swear that he was just as solidly flesh and blood as I am. How then did he manage to vanish without leaving a trace?"

Not being able to answer this question to his satisfaction and being by this time immensely irritated by the whole transaction, Roy Stover proceeded on his way, his hand fondling the trusty automatic pistol in his coat pocket.

"I sure knew what I was doing when I came heeled," he thought. "This isn't going to be any school outing. I can see that."

When a considerable period of tramping over the rocky wood's trail apparently brought him no nearer

his destination, Roy stopped once more to take his bearings.

He was hot and tired and increasingly anxious as to whether he would find Brackenbone in the old stone house, if and when he reached it.

"That wild-haired old boy may be an employee of Brackenbone," he cogitated. "If so, he will hustle on and give the boss the tip, which will probably mean that one half-baked news reporter will have his trouble for his pains."

Roy looked about him and found himself in a very dense portion of the woodland. Trees pressed closely around him and it was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead of him in any direction.

The old stone house might be only a few hundred yards in advance or it might be at the other end of the island.

The only encouraging fact was that the rocky wood's road led steadily in one direction and promised to come out eventually upon the clearing where the first owner of Cliff Island had built the house.

"This path must lead somewhere," Roy soliloquized, "and since there's only one important place on the island to which it can lead, it seems that I can't be far wrong in following it. But, gee whiz, what a weary job!"

Roy blamed himself now for not having found out the exact location of the house before leaving the mainland. Elmer then could have landed him at a

spot close to his destination and valuable time would have been saved.

Still, he had not liked to ask too many questions. There was always the chance that someone would guess what he was up to and get in ahead of him.

Some more time spent in tiresome trudging brought Roy to a clearing. Here he saw, not the building he had hoped to find, but another structure of a very different type.

It was a cabin of logs roughly put together. It had two windows and a door. Outside was a chopping block with a rusted hatchet leaning against it. The whole place had a dreary and deserted appearance.

However, experience had taught Roy that one could not tell from the outside of a house what one might find inside, and he approached the shack with caution.

One of the two windows was broken. Both were covered thickly with cobwebs. He looked in the broken window.

The cabin appeared to consist of one large room, containing a fireplace, a dirty, littered bunk, a table, and one rickety chair.

No one was in the room. There was no doubt that it was completely empty as far as human beings were concerned, and Roy's caution relaxed somewhat in consequence.

He went to the door and tried the handle, only to find the door locked. He could have forced it easily enough, but saw no reason for doing it at that time.

He returned to the broken window, reached his hand inside and brushed away some of the cobwebs, so that he could have a clearer view of the room.

Certainly, despite the deserted appearance of the cabin viewed from without, the room had been lived in recently. Roy was sure of it.

Fresh ashes flecked the front of the rusted stove. An open sardine can stood on the table. Its inside cover was shiny with oil and not yet black, as it would have been if exposed for any length of time to the air. There were cooking utensils on the stove and an old blue sweater lay over the back of the chair.

"That room is being lived in," Roy decided.

He glanced about him at the quiet woodland as though he half expected the owner of the cabin to appear and demand to know what he was doing there. It was not an altogether pleasant expectation, and after one more glance at the deserted interior of the cabin Roy crossed the narrow clearing and entered the woods.

He picked up the trail and followed it doggedly, his mind busy with speculation.

"Someone lives in that cabin," he muttered to himself. "The question is—who?"

He wondered whether it were Brackenbone who had taken up a temporary abode in the shack for reasons best known to himself. If he were really a fugitive, as some things seemed to indicate, a hunting shack might be as good a place as any other to hide in until the hue and cry had passed.

Yet, somehow, Roy Stover did not believe that the financier had eaten the sardines in that freshly opened can or that it was Brackenbone's sweater that hung over the back of the rickety chair.

He felt it was far more likely that the real clue to the man's whereabouts would be discovered in or about the old stone house.

"Provided I ever find it," he muttered to himself. "I begin to believe that the house is a myth or that it vanished into thin air when it heard that I was coming, like that wild-haired old fellow who was following me."

He was pushing his way through a heavy tangle of undergrowth when he heard a sound that froze his blood.

A sharp and warning rattle made him spring backward, his hand gripping his pistol.

CHAPTER XI

A CLOSE CALL

As ROY STOVER drew his gun, the triangular head of a rattlesnake shot toward him.

There was a flash and a loud report. The reptile thrashed the bushes in its death throes, its head a mass of pulp. Sickened, Roy turned his head away to see a second rattler gliding off through the underbrush.

"Gee, this place is full of them!" the young reporter told himself. "I'll need eyes in the back of my head if I am to keep out of trouble."

He pocketed his pistol but kept his hand on the butt of it. He generally went armed on a dangerous assignment. Now he was more than ever glad that he had his automatic with him.

He proceeded along the path with increased caution, placing his feet warily, keeping an eye on the tangled underbrush and the crevices of the rocks.

He noticed that the path was becoming overgrown with weeds and rank grass. In fact, it was nearly impossible to see any path at all at some points.

Roy paused, took off his hat and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Phew! Hot work!" he muttered. "Now what's happened, anyway? Did I lose the right path a way back and pick up a strange one or have I come to the end of the original trail?"

In trying to determine this question, Roy Stover retraced his steps, only to find himself at the end of half an hour's walking completely at a loss.

During some part of this unsatisfactory journey he must have strayed from the poorly marked path, following something that was not a trail at all, but merely a bare patch between the trees and rocks.

"Of all the complete jackasses, I'm the worst!" he cried in desperation. "I come over here to Cliff Island all set to get a line on that rotter, Brackenbone, and incidentally pull in a scoop for the paper, and what I really do is to get myself lost in the woods!"

He sat down on a rock, first ascertaining that no rattlesnakes basked in the crevices, and considered the situation. It was an exasperating one at the best. In a case where quick action was of paramount importance, nothing could be more unfortunate than this delay in reaching the old stone house and, presumably, Brackenbone. It was a contingency that had been unforeseen.

He noticed as he sat there, recovering his breath and trying to use his brain instead of his feet in the attempt to solve his problem, that the afternoon was getting on. The sunlight slanted through the trees

with the golden, mellow glow that precedes dusk. The shadows of trees and bushes were lengthening on the ground.

"There's something mighty funny about this island," pondered Roy, "and I agree with Elmer that it isn't a healthy place to linger in. Still, I've got to find Brackenbone. I owe the paper that much, to say nothing of the poor dupes who have lost their money. But if I don't do something, night is going to find me here without having even located the house. Wonder what Elmer would say if he could see me now! Chances are I'll spend a night on the island, after all.

"I'm lost," Roy continued his soliloquy, "but I refuse to admit it. On an island as long and narrow as Cliff Island, it should be impossible to be lost for very long. For instance, the lake can't be far off. All I have to do is to walk at right angles to the course I've been following and I'm bound to come to the water. Once there all I'll have to do is to follow the shore line. It's dollars to doughnuts that whoever built the old stone house built it close to the water. What's the use of owning an island if you have to live inland?"

Encouraged by this line of reasoning, the young reporter glanced at the sun, turned due west, and set out with quickened pace. But he had often to relax that pace, for the obstacles were frequent and the living obstacles were dangerous. Once he caught a glimpse of a snake and twice he heard the sound of

heavy bodies drawn hastily over stones and matted leaves.

"A cheerful place, this island," grumbled Roy. "If I get away from it without being bitten by at least one rattler, I'm a fool for luck."

The going was all uphill, and Roy knew that he was going to come out on the cliff side of the lake. This he eventually did, after a hard tussle with tough, jungle-like vines, massed groups of rocks, and fallen tree trunks.

The water looked good to him, and a cool, refreshing breeze brought him some measure of relief from the heat. He stood on the edge of the cliff and was amazed to see how far below him the narrow strip of sand appeared.

"The cliffs didn't seem this high, looking up at them from the water," he remarked to himself.

From where he stood Roy had a clear view of the upper end of the island. To his immense disappointment and chagrin, he saw nothing resembling a house.

As he stood there scanning the shore line, or as much as he could see of it from his vantage point, something struck the rock behind him with a heavy thud.

Roy whirled about, startled. He saw no one, but a big knotted club lying close to the rock explained the origin of the thud.

There was no doubt that the club had been aimed at him. Had it hit him, it would have knocked him

over the edge of the cliff to maiming or death on the sands below.

This unprovoked attack by an unknown assailant jolted Roy into a vivid sense of peril.

Who had hurled the club?

Roy remembered the glimpse he had caught earlier that day of a wild and unkempt head, of a lined face and staring eyes.

The "wild man!"

Pistol in hand, Roy Stover darted into the woods in search of the miscreant. He was so angry that for a few moments he was completely beside himself. If he had come upon his assailant at that moment, there was no knowing what would have happened.

However, there was no sign of his mysterious enemy. The club might have hurtled through the air on its mission of evil all by itself for any trace there was of human agency.

Thoroughly exasperated, Roy Stover thrashed among the bushes, his pistol ready, his jaw grimly set.

Once he thought he heard the sound of running footsteps and made in that direction like a hound on the trail of a deer. He stumbled over rocks and roots of trees, falling flat more than once, only to leap to his feet and push on again.

Finally, panting, hot, out of breath, he paused to listen and could hear nothing. The woods seemed to mock him with their stillness. A bird's vesper song, the chattering of a squirrel, the rush of a chipmunk as it scuttled to safety—that was all.

The young reporter looked down at the weapon in his hand, smiled grimly, and thrust it into his pocket.

"You can't use firearms on a ghost," he muttered, "and that's what this fellow seems to be. He sure has got the art of disappearing down to a science."

He was looking about him as though he still hoped that this mysterious enemy would materialize from behind a rock when he noticed something that banished his irritation and inspired him with hope.

Only two or three yards from the spot to which his chase had brought him was a trail—not a narrow wood's path such as he had followed before, but a broad, clearly marked road. Here, in all probability, was the true approach to the old stone mansion.

"Aha, my unknown enemy!" cried Roy. "It's possible that you've done me a favor without intending to. We shall have to see about this."

Eagerly, dismissing thoughts of the wild man and the ghost of the dead hunter, Roy followed the path.

By this time he had been hours on the island and the shadows of dusk fell heavily on the woods. If the trail upon which he had inadvertently stumbled had not been so clearly indicated, the chances were that the young newspaper man would have lost himself in the woods of Cliff Island for the third time that day.

As it was, he was able to proceed without difficulty, the path growing more distinct the further he followed it.

"This certainly must lead to the house," he assured himself.

The words had barely formed in his mind when he saw it; a gaunt, gray structure, half covered with creeping vines, standing lonely and forbidding against a background of trees.

"There you are!" cried Roy exultantly. "I've run you to earth at last. Now for that interview with John Brackenbone."

A few yards farther on the trail broadened out into a gravel path which ran around the side of the house. Lawns that had evidently once been well tended but were now ragged and weed-choked surrounded the building.

Trees had been cut down, and about their blackened stumps clung ivy, graciously hiding age and decay. Several large trees had been left standing, and under these in a convenient position to catch the shade stood rustic benches and a chair or two.

Despite these evidences of former occupancy, the old house had a forlorn and deserted aspect. There was not a light to be seen, though dark must have fully come to the interior.

Roy Stover had a moment of misgiving.

"Shouldn't wonder if that old Negro purposely gave me wrong directions," he murmured. "I'll bet Brackenbone never came here at all."

CHAPTER XII

THE MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

ROY STOVER's fleeting impression that John Brackenbone had not come to the island was apparently confirmed by the utterly deserted aspect of the old mansion. It stood there in the midst of the clearing, against its background of trees, remote, aloof, baffling. There was something sinister about its quality.

Roy pondered for a few moments, then decided that the queer happenings of the afternoon were getting on his nerves, making them jumpy.

"If the rumors about Brackenbone are true and he really made off with funds belonging to others," he reasoned, "what more natural, after all, than the deserted appearance of the house? A man skulking from the law would hardly be likely to advertise his hiding place. In which case it behooves me to move with great caution, so as to catch him unawares."

To deaden the sound of his footsteps, the young reporter forsook the gravel path and took to the lawn, on one side.

The building did not improve on closer scrutiny. If anything, it took on a more repellent aspect. As Roy

stood close to it, looking up at it speculatively, its high, arched windows seemed to frown down upon him.

"Wonder whether it would be better to try the front or the back door," he mused. "Maybe one of the windows would be easier yet. However, that would be breaking and entering, and that might get me a bullet. Guess I'd better apply at the front door."

Roy slipped his hand into his pocket and his fingers closed about the butt of the pistol. Queer, he thought, what confidence that bit of metal gave a fellow!

The young reporter made his way around to the front of the house and boldly ascended the stone steps leading to the porch. There were four windows opening on to the veranda. They were closed and the shades tightly drawn. They stared blankly at Roy and he stared back challengingly at them.

There was a knocker on the old-fashioned, heavy, oaken door. Roy lifted this and let it fall. The sound reverberated through the house. It seemed loud enough to wake the dead, but it brought no response.

Again Roy sounded the knocker. Twice more he repeated the process.

No one came and he could detect no stir within. He decided after some minutes of waiting to try the back door.

Here he met with no better success. As far as could be ascertained from the outside, the house was empty.

"I'm going to get into that house if I have to break in," Roy gritted between his teeth.

He made a round of the windows and found several over which the shades had not been drawn. The glimpses that he caught of the interior did nothing to combat his impression that the place was unoccupied.

Roy was nonplussed and hugely disappointed. If Brackenbone had not come to the island, then he, Roy Stover, had been following a false trail and had wasted a precious afternoon.

His coming to Cliff Island had been due entirely to the tip from the old colored gardener. How far could information from that source be trusted? It was wholly within the possibilities that Brackenbone had told the man to say that in order to put pursuers on a blind trail while he made his escape.

Roy made the rounds again and eventually arrived at the front door. Without having formed any definite plan of action, he put his hand on the knob.

To his surprise, it yielded. The door swung easily inward!

For the space of several moments the young reporter hesitated. He had fully expected the door to be locked. Entrance to the house was made almost too easy. It seemed to smack of a trap. Who was standing perhaps in the darkness of the hall?

The fingers about his pistol tightened as Roy pushed the door further open. He looked into a hall heavy with shadows and cobwebs. An overpowering, musty odor enveloped the young reporter as he stepped over the threshold.

"I'll bet the place hasn't been aired for months,"

he told himself. "No one lives here. No one could live in such an atmosphere."

He took a few steps into the hall and then jumped nervously. The front door had closed with a muffled thud!

Roy sprang to the door and turned the knob, fighting off a feeling of superstitious dread.

The door opened easily enough, and when Roy released the knob he found that it swung to of its own weight. He grinned mirthlessly.

"There's the ghost. If I'm not very careful this place is going to get me."

As he said the words half-aloud he thought he heard a swishing sound in one corner of the hall.

He whirled toward the sound, pistol leveled.

Nothing there!

"Of all the complete fools!" he chided himself savagely. "What's the matter with me, anyway?"

Deciding that the hall was not a pleasant place to linger in, Roy turned to the nearest door at hand. This led into a room that was lighter than the hall, for it possessed three windows and the shade of one of these was raised.

Roy drew his pocket torch and flashed it about the room. It was a library. Three sides contained shelves loaded with books. Dust lay heavy on the volumes, so much so in some cases that the titles were obscured. Roy wasted little time upon the books, but swung the light of his torch in a swift survey of the room's furnishings.

There were several easy chairs, a couch, a table and a desk. A splotch of white on the desk caught Roy's eye. Unlike the other articles in the room, the paper was free from dust.

Perhaps it might prove a clue to the whereabouts of John Brackenbone!

Roy crossed to the desk and turned the white light of the torch full upon the paper. He read the words written on it. He started, looked about him, then lifted the sheet of paper and read the message intently a second time. It was simple enough, consisting of two pregnant lines:

"I am tired of all this and think
perhaps I had better end it all."

There was no signature, but Roy thought he knew the identity of the writer. Joe Williamson had shown Roy a letter to the former's firm bearing John Brackenbone's signature. That signature and the writing on the sheet of paper were in the same hand.

For the third time Roy Stover read that brief message. It could, he thought, mean only one thing. John Brackenbone intended to commit suicide. He was going to kill himself—perhaps had already killed himself!

This realization gave Roy Stover an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps John Brackenbone had committed suicide in that very house!

The shadows pressed in upon the youth. He felt

the encroaching darkness like something tangible, something that was closing around his throat robbing him of breath.

"It's this confounded air in here," he muttered, and went to a window, meaning to open it. To his surprise he found that it was nailed shut.

With an effort he regained control of his rioting senses. He approached the desk again and stood beside it, trying to decide what he must do.

"I've got to search this house," he told himself. "It isn't going to be fun, and I wish I had Elmer Raymond or Joe Williamson here with me. But if John Brackenbone has shot or hung himself in this house, the sooner I find it out the better."

He took a fresh grip on his pistol and resolutely approached the library door. As he did so, he distinctly heard something move in the hall outside.

CHAPTER XIII

GHOSTLY TERRORS

AT THAT moment Roy Stover came nearer than ever before to knowing the meaning of fear. Not fear of anything human or understandable, but of something ghostlike and intangible, something not amenable to reason or firearms and therefore doubly to be feared.

"Who's there?" he cried.

His voice sounded loud and strident in the silent house, but nobody answered him. He had expected no answer, and yet the absence of all sound was unbearably oppressive.

Roy strode to the door and flashed his light about the hall.

No one there!

"I imagined I heard someone," he muttered. "All sorts of noises in an old house. One of them fooled me."

He paused at the foot of the winding stairway, wondering whether to begin his unpleasant search in the attic or the cellar.

"Better begin upstairs and work down," he decided.

"The knowledge that there is nothing upstairs—provided I find nothing—will make it easier to search the cellar when the time comes."

It required all his grit to ascend the shadowy stairway of that dreary house, not knowing at what moment his search might terminate in its gruesome objective.

"Looking for a corpse is no fun," he muttered, "even if you know what mode of death was chosen. If Brackenbone had left word as to whether he expected to shoot or hang himself, one would know what he might expect to see. Gee, but it's dark in here!"

As Roy reached the landing, he was startled by a rumbling clap of thunder. Lightning flashed in the dirt-grimed window, illuminating for an instant the dusty interior.

"So we're going to have a storm," thought the young reporter. "Well, that will make the occasion still more festive."

At the head of the first flight of stairs he halted and flashed the light about him. The upper hall was square. Six doors opened from it and all but one of them was shut. Investigation showed Roy that the sixth door opened upon a flight of stairs.

"Leading up to the attic," he conjectured. "All old houses have them. The attic is the most likely place to search, anyway."

The stairs were ladderlike, so steep that Roy was forced to watch his step.

It was pitch dark up there, and the reporter's pocket

torch was able to illuminate only a small area at a time. The attic was hot and stifling, and again the shadows pressed about Roy, giving him the sensation of a hand reaching for his throat.

The place was filled with boxes, trunks, and old chests of all sizes and kinds. Roy stumbled over one of them, severely barking his shins. The hurt made no impression on him. He was moving his torch slowly along the beams and rafters, fearful of some dangling object that the searching light might at any moment expose.

However, there was no ghastly, swaying thing suspended from a rafter or slumped over one of the chests. There was nothing but a big place filled with discarded furniture and other junk, with regiments of spiders and mice.

Spurring himself on to make thorough work of it, Roy searched behind every box, behind every rickety rocking chair and three-legged table.

Two rats scuttled out from a hole in one of the boxes. A large black and gold spider regarded him evilly, then curled up and played dead. Besides these, Roy discovered nothing.

He was not sorry to leave the attic, but the fact that he had not found a corpse there did little to lift the weight from his spirits. There was the rest of the house to search, and any room might reveal what he feared but fully expected to find.

A more vivid flash of lightning and a louder crack of thunder warned him that the storm was moving

closer. The wind, sweeping in from the lake, made sighing noises in the trees.

The old house had grown blacker, the shadows heavier and more menacing. They seemed to mock the pale beam of Roy's torch, challenging it to penetrate their mysteries.

In the hall the young reporter regarded the closed doors with fascinated speculation. What horror might the opening of any one of them disclose!

He found that hesitation made final action all the harder. Nerving himself, he turned the knob of the first door. The beam of his searchlight failed to discover anything more gruesome than a set of dust-covered black walnut bedroom furniture, a rag rug, and a towel rack. Not satisfied, Roy entered the room and forced himself to open the closet door. Still, nothing there!

The four other doors, three of them opening into bedrooms, the other into a long-old-fashioned bathroom, failed to disclose anything horrifying.

Far from being reassured by his failure to find the body of Brackenbone in one of the upper rooms, Roy was still firmly convinced that somewhere in that dreary house was the dreadful object he sought and feared to find.

It seemed reasonable enough. If, hard pressed for funds, Brackenbone had helped himself to some not belonging to him, he had put himself in danger of prison. Perhaps he had previously felt the grip of the law. Little was known of his antecedents before

he had come to Lakeport and cut such a wide swath. What more natural that rather than face its terrors again he should seek to evade jail by ending his life? Similar things were happening every day.

The note in the library had indicated that he meant to commit suicide. What place more suitable for that last desperate act than this old house on a seldom visited island?

The suspense was wearing on the young reporter's mind.

"If there are many more rooms in this plagued house I'll run for the lake and swim to the mainland," he muttered. "This is worse than any horrible dream I've ever had because its so long drawn out."

As Roy approached the stairway leading to the lower hall, it seemed to him that the light of his torch was growing dim. He berated himself for his thoughtlessness. He had known for some time that he needed a new battery. He had promised himself to attend to it, but had put it off in favor of more pressing concerns.

Now his carelessness promised to put him in a pretty fix. At any moment the light might give out altogether, leaving him in darkness in this sinister house with a dead body for company.

"I'll have to try to find some candles," he thought, and put out the light preparatory to descending the steps of the staircase in the dark. "In the meantime, I'll certainly have to save the battery as much as possible."

The young newspaper man was about to descend to the lower hall when he came to an abrupt halt.

There had been another flash of lightning followed by a crack of thunder, but now a noise of another sort had reached his ears.

Were those sounds footsteps? If so, were they above or below him?

With his senses on a razor edge, Roy Stover strained his ears, standing stock still.

A deathlike silence followed. Whatever the noise had been, it was not repeated although Roy waited a full minute before taking a deep breath and proceeding down the stairs. Once he stumbled and came close to falling. Then he proceeded with added caution.

Reaching the lower hall, he flashed the light on again to get his bearings.

He recognized the library door and thought he could rule out that room. "I don't think there's a closet in it and I'm sure there wasn't a corpse," he cogitated. "I'll try every other door as I come to it and search each room in turn. Now then, I wonder what we have here?"

He entered the door on the left and found himself in a big living room. This apartment, which had evidently been enlarged by removing a partition at some time or other, ran the full length of the house.

There was no closet there and no sign of an act of violence having been committed in it.

A door at the end revealed a small room branching

off that had evidently been used as a private den or study by the man of the house.

There was nothing there that was significant, and Roy looked around for a door that would lead into the hall or into some other portion of the mansion. He had no wish to linger. In action alone he could get a sedative for his nerves.

The light of the torch was growing increasingly dim, and he knew that unless he hurried he would have to postpone the rest of his search until morning.

He found a second door to the study, but it was locked. As Roy turned to find the door leading back to the living room the light of his torch went out, leaving him in darkness.

Roy stood still trying to get his bearings. The darkness pressed down upon him. It was like a solid weight on his chest.

Now that he had no light, it was odd how his sense of direction failed him. He could not for the life of him remember the location of that door into the living room.

A flash of lightning illumined the room briefly. It was instantaneous only, but it revealed the door. He probably had known it all along, he thought, only he had allowed himself to get rattled. Foolish to get rattled! Nothing to get rattled about.

He reached the door and found it closed. That surprised him, for he did not remember having shut it.

Perhaps he had, though. Couldn't tell what he might do to-night.

Abruptly his rambling thoughts paused, concentrating with almost painful intensity upon an incredible fact. The door into the living room would not open! It was locked!

"It can't be," cried Roy angrily.

He turned the knob and pushed against the panels. The door did not yield.

This was nightmare. Roy Stover wanted to beat on the door with his fist, to kick it, to break it down. The darkness was crushing him, the musty air stifling him. He *must* get out!

With an effort he got control of himself, tried to think clearly. The door was an old-fashioned one made of solid wood two inches thick. The locks were old-fashioned, too. They held.

Reason told Roy that, alone and unaided, he could not hope to break down the door. Nothing but a battering ram could accomplish it.

The lock on the door must have been a spring lock, some eccentricity, perhaps, of the original owner. Roy, in entering the room might inadvertently have closed it or, like the front door, it had swung back of itself. At any rate, he was locked in that room as securely as though he had been in a prison cell.

Not quite. There was the window. Fool that he was not to have thought of that before!

Roy turned toward the window eagerly. He felt that he must breathe some fresh cool air or choke to death.

The storm outside was at its height. Rain came

down in torrents, beating upon the parched ground that drank it in gratefully. Wind whipped in from the lake, bending the trees, dashing the rain in tingling gusts against the window pane. Thunder crackled and lightning flashed in weird streaks about the lonely house on Cliff Island.

Roy stumbled toward the window, eager for a whiff of the rain-drenched air.

What was that?

He pulled himself up short and stood still, listening. The skin at the base of his skull began to crawl!

CHAPTER XIV

THE CREEPING DEATH

ROY STOVER had heard a sound in the room. It was no upstanding, human, two-legged sound, but a slithery, slimy, ghostly sort of noise that chilled the blood in his veins.

Roy felt that the room was empty when he entered it. It must still be empty unless—unless someone entered afterward, unknown to him, and closed the door after him!

The thought was not a pleasant one. Roy Stover leveled his pistol and called hoarsely:

“Who’s there?”

No answer! Yet there was someone or something in that room.

Roy did not move. He did not call again. All his faculties were intent on listening.

No sound except the noise of the storm outside, the swishing of rain against the windows, the rumble of the thunder.

Was it possible that the sound he had heard had come from outside the room?

No. If his life had depended upon the truth of his

statement, Roy Stover would have sworn that that odd, blood-chilling rustle had been within the room—close to him. But now, though he held his breath to listen, he could hear nothing.

The lightning flashes became more frequent. Now and then a sharp light flashed into the room, but it did not illumine the shadowy corners, deep in darkness.

When minutes had passed and there had been no repetition of the sound that had startled him, Roy began to think that his imagination had tricked him again. He was overwrought. Any unexplained sound in his present state of mind might take on a sinister meaning.

He grew angry at himself, at John Brackenbone, at the whole set of unfortunate circumstances that had led to his imprisonment in this tiny room in the grim old house on Cliff Island.

"I'm sick of it. I've had enough," he told himself. "I'll get out of here and sit on a rock in the woods till morning in spite of the rain. Then I'll come back and look for the body. If there is a body," he added. "I'm beginning to think the whole thing is a hoax, note and all."

Roy started for the window but did not reach it.

Once more he was stopped dead in his tracks by that sound, that slithering, uncertain, ghastly sound.

Again he shouted:

"Who's there?"

This time there was an answer—an answer to freeze the blood. From the shadows beneath the window of

the study came a deadly rattle, the warning of a rattlesnake coiled and ready to attack!

Roy leaped aside. As he did so, a long sinuous body lashed the air so close to him that he could feel the wind of its passing.

Horried as he was at the thought of that hideous enemy seeking his life in the darkness, Roy Stover did not lose his head.

In his leap backward, he had stumbled against a piece of furniture. This he recognized as the couch, hugging one wall of the study, and he jumped up on it.

In his horror it seemed to him that the floor of the room was carpeted with slimy, writhing creatures and that if he moved he must put his foot on them. On the couch he felt better, though he knew that he was not much safer there than on the floor.

"Oh, for a light!" he groaned. "A fine time for that wretched torch to go out."

He held himself tense, his hand gripping his pistol, listening for some sound that would indicate the location of the rattler.

There was no sound, and gradually the silence became unbearable. He could not stand there forever in the dark listening for something that might bring death with it any minute. He was getting stiff. To the stifling air of the room was added the fetid smell of the snake.

At that moment Roy Stover would have given half his hopes for the future to find himself in the cool, blessed air outside that awful room.

But what was he to do? He had no notion where the reptile was. If he got down from the couch, he might step upon it.

"Which would mean the end of all things for one Roy Stover," he thought.

On the other hand, he could not stand on the couch all night. But the thought of moving, even to sit down was unthinkable before ascertaining the whereabouts of his lurking enemy.

When the lightning illumined the room in brief flashes, Roy strained his eyes for the sight of a loathsome body, of an ugly, triangular head.

All he saw were the faint outlines of furniture, shadows etched against deeper shadows.

"Rattlers don't attack unless they're frightened or hurt," he tried to assure himself. "If this fellow isn't between me and the window, there's just a chance that I might reach it, open it, and get outside without provoking a stroke."

But he had no means of telling that the rattler was not between him and the window.

The tumult of the elements outside emphasized the sinister quiet within. There was no further demonstration from the snake. Perhaps it had retired to some lair under desk or table to wait developments.

The silence, the inactivity, became intolerable to Roy Stover. As the slow minutes dragged by he felt that any action, however hazardous, was preferable to his present course of waiting. The air, heavy with dust and the stench of the rattler, suffocated him. If

he should grow dizzy, lose consciousness, fall from the couch——.

"I'll get to that window if I die in the attempt," he decided desperately. "Perhaps the snake is asleep."

He lowered himself cautiously from the couch. The springs creaked, and he thought he could hear a stir in the darkness near by.

"Confound those springs!" he muttered.

The floor at least was hard and firm underfoot. But what else was there that would move when he stepped upon it? To his fevered imagination the floor was full of writhing bodies.

He could tell the position of the window from the occasional lightning flashes. He made his way in the direction of that vague square. He knew that at any moment he might encounter the rattler. His ear was strained to catch the horrific battle cry of his unseen enemy.

The tension and the suspense were horrible. Roy decided that he would not have time to open the window and climb out. Besides, it might be nailed down. He braced himself to dive through it headfirst, chancing the cuts from broken glass.

He stumbled over something like a coil of rope and sprawled his length upon the floor.

Fortunately when he fell he did not relinquish his grip on the automatic. More fortunately still, he did not for a moment lose his head.

The deadly peril of his position seemed to clear his mind. At least he was at grips with a tangible

enemy. At this thought a strange exultation flooded him.

The reptile must have been sleeping or it would have struck already. Now, as a flash of lightning brighter than any that had preceded filled the room with radiance, Roy saw the rattler plainly, the triangular head drawn back to strike!

CHAPTER XV

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

LIKE lightning Roy Stover's left hand shot out and gripped the body of the rattlesnake just behind the head, holding it with fingers of steel. In his right hand he shifted the pistol, holding it by the muzzle as a club.

He could feel the coils of the rattler thrashing about him. He knew that the reptile was striving to encircle his body to get a purchase that would break the desperate grip of the fingers.

Roy fought off the coils. With all his strength he pinioned the wicked head to the floor. He raised his pistol and brought the butt down full upon the rattler's head.

Again and again he struck. There was a sickening convulsion of the coils. Roy wielded the heavy butt ruthlessly until the thrashing and writhing of the snake subsided and it lay still.

Even then, the young reporter scarcely dared believe in his good fortune. He got to his knees, still retaining his grip on the reptile; then, when he finally did release it, leaped warily aside.

He needed not to worry. What shuddering of the snake's body was still perceptible was due to muscular reaction. Its head was smashed into pulp, its venom had died with it.

Feeling shaken and sick, Roy stumbled to the window, found the sash nailed down, and crashed out a pane with the revolver butt.

"John Brackenbone, if he still lives, can send in a bill for repairs, if he likes," thought Roy. "I'll pay it with pleasure."

The fresh, moisture-laden wind swept into the room, sweetening the musty air. Roy breathed it in thirsty gulps and felt himself magically revived and strengthened.

Standing at the window, he reviewed the hectic happenings of the last few hours and tried to decide what to do next. Just a few dreadful minutes ago the one desire of his life had been to get away from the sinister mansion. Now he was not sure, not at all sure, that he wanted to get away.

"I can't leave the island till daylight, anyway," he reasoned. "In this storm all the lake craft will have taken to shelter, and it would be a tough job, tougher than I care to tackle right now, to swim to the mainland. My only alternative would be to find a nice hard rock and sit on it in the pouring rain for the rest of the night. Even this house is preferable to that.

"Besides," he went on in his thoughts, "there's mystery here and I want to have my hack at solving it before I turn in a report to the paper. What a scoop

it will be if I can get the real truth about John Brackenbone!"

This reflection, with its accompanying relish of Hen Feley's chagrin over a rival's success, decided the young reporter to stay until he found out something definite concerning the whereabouts of the owner of the house. Its living owner? Or of its former owner, now dead?

The prospect, however, of remaining locked in the study until morning with the body of the mangled rattler for company was not pleasant. Roy determined to get outside, go around, and enter by the front door and remain in the library till morning.

He smashed the remaining panes in the window until there was a hole big enough for him to get through, slipped his pistol into his pocket to keep it dry, and let himself down to the sodden ground.

Ducking his head and pulling his coat collar up around his neck, he made his way to the front of the house.

The storm had nearly spent itself. The rain was subsiding to a drizzle, the thunder rumbled distantly.

Standing close to the front door, the young reporter gazed around. It was dark, but occasionally a distant flash of lightning illuminated the vicinity.

He started. Out among the trees he thought he saw a ghostlike form flitting to and fro. Could it be a man?

Then Roy sniffed at himself. No, it was not a man.

It was a broken-off tree branch—a long branch—swaying back and forth in the dim light.

"Gee, this is certainly getting on my nerves," the young reporter told himself. "I guess I'll feel a whole lot better when daylight comes."

Again the front door yielded to his pressure. It was not without misgivings that Roy found himself once more in the echoing hall of the empty house.

He reached the library without difficulty. Just inside the door he paused and drew his weapon. He was taking no more chances in that abode of dread.

He realized with a feeling of nausea that the pistol was sticky, that his hand was sticky, with the blood of the rattlesnake.

He took out his handkerchief, wiped the bloodstains from his hand and the butt of the pistol and restored the handkerchief to his pocket.

A thought occurred to him with something of a shock:

"If John Brackenbone's body is found with a bullet in it—supposing he chose that way to commit suicide—then this bloodstained handkerchief and the missing bullet from my gun that settled that rattler in the woods may require some explaining. Great Scott!" he groaned, sinking into a chair. "This thing grows worse and worse."

Roy had had nothing to eat since breakfast, a fact that was borne in on him with more and more force as the slow minutes dragged by.

"If I had a light I'd raid the pantry of this place," he told himself. "I might find a few cans of something."

Driven by hunger, he even considered attempting to reach the kitchen without a light. The prospect of stumbling about in that weird abode in the dark was not inviting, however, and Roy decided to endure his hunger and put off further investigations until the morning.

He found the most comfortable chair in the library and settled himself in it, his pistol ready at hands for emergencies. Then he painstakingly reviewed events as they had occurred from the time Elmer Raymond had landed him on the lower end of the island.

He remembered his first glimpse of the "wild man." That pallid face with its staring eyes and unkempt hair and beard was not a pleasant vision to recall.

That it was the wild man who had continued to follow him and had later hurled the club at him, Roy did not for a moment doubt.

Why had he done it? Who was this wild man? What was he doing on the island? Was his attack on Roy the irresponsible act of a madman or had he some deliberate object to gain by the death of the young reporter?

Since Roy could not answer these questions, he passed over them.

His arrival at the old stone mansion, his subsequent adventures culminating in the battle with the rattlesnake were too vivid in his mind to need recalling.

He wondered about the rattler and how it had got there. Had it slipped in at some time when a door had been left open and not been able to get out? Or it might have found its way through some crevice in the foundation and wriggled its way up from the cellar.

"Either way, it very nearly did for me," the young reporter thought, with a shudder.

Out of the tumult of his thoughts two facts emerged to claim his chief attention. One was the attack by the mysterious wild man, the other the note left by John Brackenbone on his desk.

Had the note been left by John Brackenbone?

This thought came to Roy like a galvanic shock and almost lifted him from his chair.

The wild man and that note had been persistently coupled in his mind. Now he knew why. He had subconsciously associated that note with some act on the part of the wild man. Was it possible that grotesque creature might have penned the note himself and left it there on the desk to baffle possible inquiry, to start investigation along the wrong trail?

The suggestion was a startling one, and Roy Stover considered it in all its aspects.

"If that note was planted," he mused, "then this queer old man with the ragged beard had some reason for trying to make it seem that John Brackenbone died by his own hand.

"Why would he want to make people—the police, especially—believe this? To cover up his own tracks, of course. Why should he want to cover his tracks?

Answer, because he disposed of Brackenbone himself."

Having arrived at this possibility, Roy found himself up against a blank wall. For a murder there must be a motive, and he could supply no motive on the part of the wild man to rid the world—and himself—of John Brackenbone.

"Still," Roy reasoned, "Brackenbone seems to have made plenty of enemies. For all I know, the wild man may have been one of them, and with very good reason. Brackenbone might have tricked him, ruined him, spoiled his life.

"Or the wild man may have felt in his twisted mind that Cliff Island belonged to himself. He might have been jealous of Brackenbone's intrusion. Perhaps that was why he hurled his club at me. He tried to kill me. Why shouldn't he have tried to kill Brackenbone, and in that case succeeded?"

The possibility was looming larger and larger in Roy's mind until he suddenly remembered recognizing the handwriting of the note as that of the real estate operator.

"That would seem to eliminate my theory that the wild man was a killer," Roy admitted to himself. "Unless, of course, he had a specimen of Brackenbone's handwriting and was clever enough to imitate it."

Roy pondered the theory for some time longer, and in the process gradually dozed off, though he had not the slightest intention of going to sleep.

It might have been hours later when he awakened suddenly, every sense painfully on the alert.

What was it he had heard?

He could not recall definitely having heard anything, yet he was certain that it was some sound that had startled him wide awake.

The room was still dark, but the windows were slightly gray with the first lifting of night shadows.

Roy stiffened in his chair and slowly raised his pistol.

There was a face at the window!

CHAPTER XVI

A FRUITLESS CHASE

IT WAS a wild and haggard face that was peering into the room.

A shock of shaggy hair waved in the breeze. The eyes stared from their sunken sockets, lighted by a maniacal glare. The mouth and chin were hidden by a straggling beard.

Roy Stover leaped to his feet, pistol in hand. As he darted to the window the face disappeared.

This window, like the others, was nailed down. With an exclamation of impatience Roy picked up a paperweight from the table and shattered the glass. The next moment he leaped to the wet ground beneath the window.

Outside, the coming of dawn was more apparent than it had been from within. The shadows had lifted perceptibly, and Roy was able to see for some distance around him.

No one was there. Roy realized now that he had hardly expected to see anyone. On this ghostly island and around this ghostly house things happened that would yield to none of the usual explanations.

Take that wild face at the window. Had he really seen it? Roy wondered. Or had he been half asleep and dreamed the unpleasant vision between sleeping and waking?

He shook his head as though to clear it of the fog of confused thoughts. He *must* have seen that face. It was too distinct to have been part of a dream. Besides, he had been wide awake, he was sure, when it had appeared to him. If he began to doubt the evidence of his senses, then where would he be?

"Gee, if I'm not careful I'll go bughouse on this thing," he muttered to himself. "I'll be seeing wild men and ghosts all over the island. I've got to pull myself together or I'll never get anywhere." He paused to draw a deep breath. "But one thing is sure," he went on. "That wild man is as quick as they make 'em, and I've got to be right on my toes if I expect to keep up with him."

Still arguing with himself, the young reporter made the rounds of the clearing, searching the environs of the house as well as he could in the half light.

He could see no one and it was too dark yet to look for footprints. Besides, he realized that, if there were footprints, he was probably confusing them with his own by tramping about the house.

He considered exploring the woods close to the clearing, but, realizing the futility of stumbling about in the half dark searching for an enemy to whom every rock and tree in the woodland was an open book,

he trudged back to the house, bewildered and sorely troubled in his mind.

He went into the library and stood a long time at the desk, looking down at that slip of paper left—presumably—by John Brackenbone.

Roy tried to imagine the iron-willed, strong-jawed financier as a broken, defeated man, cowed by fear of the law into a decision to end his troubles by taking his life.

Slowly the young reporter shook his head.

"Some way," he mused, "it just doesn't wash. John Brackenbone a suicide? It doesn't square with my idea of the man. Still——"

He took the note to the window and by the faint light laboriously studied the handwriting. He was by no means as certain as he had been the night before that it was really the script of the realtor.

"I'm not sure of anything," he told himself impatiently. "This is a whale of a mystery and getting worse every minute."

He remembered the face at the window and the theory of the wild man's guilt leaped to life again.

"Doesn't a murderer always revisit the scene of the crime? What more simple explanation of this whole confounded muddle than that the wild man should have done away with John Brackenbone as revenge for some grievance, real or imaginary, of his own? The note would have been left of course in the hope of confusing the trail. It's been done before, but then it's common knowledge that murderers repeat

themselves. There's very little originality in killing."

Here Roy checked himself, fearful lest the theory run away with him and close his mind to other possibilities.

"I'm not even sure that Brackenbone has departed this life," he chided himself. "I'd better find the body before convicting the murderer."

Roy knew that he would have to wait for this until morning had fully come, and he settled himself with what patience he could muster to await the sun's rising.

He was stiff and sore from his uncomfortable sleep. The dampness of the old house invaded his body and made him shiver. He was savage with hunger, and he determined to seek the pantry on the chance of finding something edible before continuing the hunt for Brackenbone or Brackenbone's body.

As soon as light had permeated the shadows of the house sufficiently for him to find his way about, Roy resumed his investigations.

He found a room back of the library that looked like a museum. In it were several curio cabinets filled with odd pieces, probably gathered together by the earlier owner.

They looked like junk to Roy, but he supposed they were valuable because of age or historical associations. Besides the cabinets, there were some old pieces of furniture. Roy saw nothing else of interest and passed hurriedly through it on his way to the kitchen.

Here he came upon something that gave him pause. On a long, plain board table was a lunch hamper and in it were the remains of a lunch which had been partaken of recently.

This conjecture Roy confirmed by examining the bread and butter sandwiches, the hard-boiled eggs, and a number of cooked frankfurters.

"Someone ate lunch here yesterday," Roy deduced. "This stuff is comparatively fresh, and if it had been here longer it would have been coated already with a film of the dust this house is full of.

"Now the question is, who ate that lunch? Was it John Brackenbone or our friend of the bushy thatch? Might have been either of course—or both."

He paused to consider this and shook his head.

"Not together, though. I can't imagine John Brackenbone, the haughty man of wealth, breaking bread with that ragged son of the open spaces. Still, you never can tell."

He dismissed the problem for a moment to appease his own gnawing hunger.

There was an unopened can of pressed chicken in the hamper. Roy pried this open with a can opener, conveniently discovered, and dug into it, using his fingers in default of forks.

A box of crackers was brought to light by further rummaging, and Roy made satisfying sandwiches of crackers and chicken.

He had hoped for a thermos bottle of tea or coffee; but with this lacking, he went to the old-fashioned

iron sink and pumped the water till it came clear and cold, then put his mouth to the tap and slaked his thirst in the good primitive way.

When he had finished Roy Stover felt like a man again. Like many others before him, he was amazed and somewhat disconcerted at the transformation wrought by a little nourishment.

"It's rather queer and a bit humiliating to feel that so much of our courage is due to a well filled stomach," he ruminated. "A few minutes ago I was depressed and just about down and out. Now, all because of a few chicken sandwiches, I'm on my hind legs again, rearin' to go. Well, anyway, I'm thankful for that lunch hamper. It was a life saver."

Before leaving the kitchen to go to the cellar—the only part of the house he had not yet searched—Roy Stover examined carefully the pantry, shelves and floor, and the kitchen itself.

This thoroughness was rewarded by the discovery under one of the kitchen chairs of the butt of a half-smoked cigar.

"I'll bet the band is around somewhere," he murmured, and went on hunting.

Again he was repaid by finding a crumpled bit of paper near the leg of the kitchen sink.

"Coromado!" he muttered. "An expensive cigar, all right. Probably a fifty-center. Not the kind a wild man indulges in. Beyond a doubt John Brackebone was smoking it."

He took an envelope from his pocket, placed the

remains of the cigar and the band in it, and thrust back the envelope.

"I'm getting on. I've found a clue. Now let's see if I can't discover others."

The steps leading down to the cellar, like the attic stairs, were steep. Roy found the cellar damp, dark—and empty!

Having established this latter fact, the young reporter was conscious of a curious sense of disappointment. Having keyed himself to the expectation of finding proof that a tragic act had been committed in the dreary old house, it was a trifle disconcerting to find not so much as a bloodstain. Roy felt rather annoyed with John Brackenbone for not having done something about it.

"If he had had no intention of shooting or hanging himself, what did he leave that note in the library for? Perhaps my second theory is right, after all. The wild man may have murdered our villainous financier outside the house and hidden his body under a boulder in the woods."

Acting on this possibility, the young reporter abandoned the house—not without drawing a breath of relief as he thought of the horror of that night—and went outside.

Remembering the face at the library window and the attempt that had been made on his life the day before, Roy examined his pistol carefully to make sure that it was in good working order.

"If I meet that wild man again, I'm going to be prepared," he assured himself grimly.

There were footprints in plenty around the house, but they were confused, some of them almost obliterated by the heavy rainfall in the night.

"That's what comes of being an amateur," Roy mused, his brow puckered. "A professional detective would know perhaps just which footprints were mine and which had been made by somebody else. I'm jiggered if I can tell."

For some time his search of the woods in the immediate vicinity was unsuccessful. Then he came upon the cigar butt!

It was the remains of a partly smoked cigar and lay directly in the center of the path that Roy Stover had elected to follow. It was of the same brand as the one that had been found on the kitchen floor.

"Brackenbone seems to have been an extravagant smoker," the young reporter communed with himself. "He could afford to be, on other people's money," he added, with a touch of bitterness. "Still, I'm indebted to him. He seems to have furnished me with a real live clue at last."

Roy hurried on, having first picked up the butt and placed it in the envelope. He was animated now and filled with curiosity as to what he would find—if anything—at the end of the path he was pursuing.

One thing seemed tolerably certain. John Brackenbone had preceded him on that path not more than

twenty-four hours before. Roy thought that the interval was probably much less.

When John Brackenbone dropped that half-smoked cigar was he on his way to a rendezvous with death?

Realization that the end of the trail might give him an answer to that question lent added speed to Roy Stover's feet.

The path was not an easy one to follow, overgrown and almost obscured as it was by tough underbrush and masses of rock, but Roy pushed on, his impatience making light of obstacles.

He had not traveled far before he came on the remains of a third cigar.

"That fellow must smoke like a furnace," he thought.

But this cigar had hardly been smoked at all. The tip was barely charred. But the mouth part had been chewed furiously until it was a mass of shreds. The owner of that cigar had evidently been a prey to immense nervous agitation.

The young reporter placed it with the other remnants and pressed on.

"Wonder how many more I'll find between here and the end of the trail," he pondered. "It's certain now that my quarry passed this way."

The path was a long one, and it brought Roy out finally on a rocky cliff high above the water.

As Roy scanned the jagged line of cliff, his first reaction was one of disappointment. At a casual glance there was nothing to indicate that Brackenbone had come that way.

"Not even another cigar butt," mused Roy. "Since he's been so liberal with them, you might think he'd have dropped another somewhere hereabouts just to keep me encouraged."

Roy stood on the edge of the cliff and contemplated the sheer drop to the water beneath. Jagged rocks overlapped, their edges as deadly as spear points. Should one chance to drop from the ledge above, his end was almost certain.

Remembering the club that had been hurled at him the day before, Roy Stover turned and scanned the dark line of the woods intently.

Seeing nothing there to alarm him, he returned once more to his contemplation of the cliff.

"A good place to commit suicide, but uncomfortable," he thought. "I suppose, if one could leap clear of those rocks, he might manage a drowning. I wonder——"

He broke off abruptly. His roving gaze had encountered a black splotch against the uniform gray of the rocks.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's that? Looks as though I'd found something at last more important than cigar butts."

The object that challenged Roy's attention was halfway down the cliff and some distance to the left of him.

He made his way to a point directly above it and let himself down the rugged side of the cliff.

It was not an easy descent, and Roy Stover paused

to consider whether a man of Brackenbone's bulk could have made it without disastrous results.

"Perhaps he didn't," he reflected. "Probably that's the meaning of that crumpled black mass among the rocks."

It was with tingling nerves and a sensation of dread that he could not repress that young reporter kept on his way. It was not a pleasant thing to think that he might come upon the mangled corpse of a man whom a few days before he had seen in the full flush of life.

When he had almost reached his objective, Roy transferred his attention from the face of the cliff and looked down.

A scant six inches beneath him was a man's black coat. Near by was a straw hat.

Immensely relieved to find merely clothes instead of a dead body, Roy dropped to the ledge on which the articles rested.

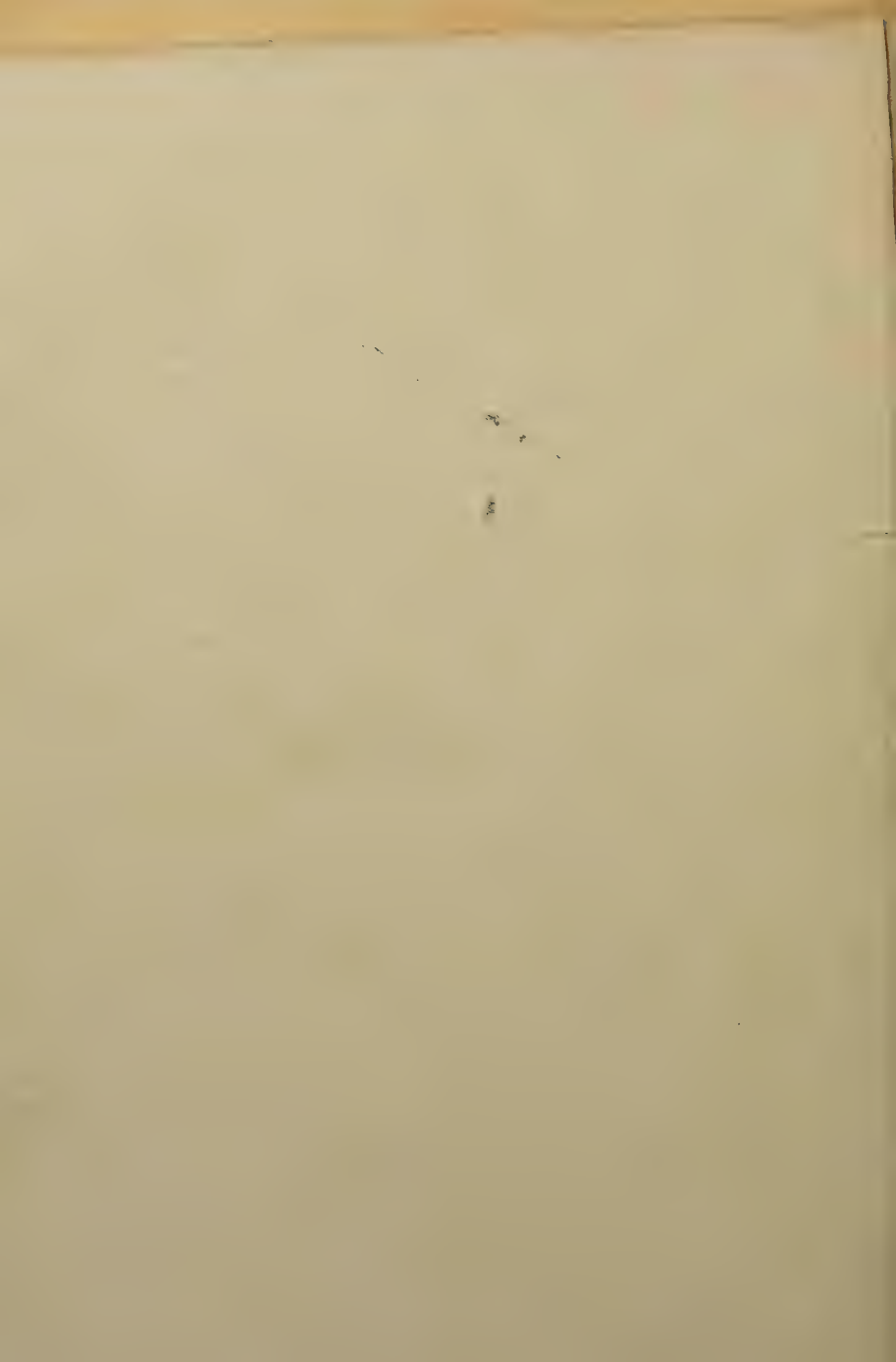
He wiped the sweat from his forehead as he stared down at these mute witnesses of tragedy. For that tragedy had stalked those rocks, and at no distant date, Roy Stover had not the slightest doubt. Even before he picked up the coat he thought he knew what had happened.

Pinned to the coat was a short note, written by the same hand that had penned the message Roy had found on the desk in the library of the old stone house.

It was still sodden from the rain of the night before. The ink had run and the writing was blurred, almost illegible. But Roy managed to make it out.



With a sensation of dread the young reporter kept on his way.
(*The Cliff Island Mystery*) (Page 136)



"I am a desperate man," the note read. "My financial ventures have failed. Worse than that, I have squandered funds to the amount of fifty thousand dollars which were not mine to squander. Being a failure and worse, I can see no further reason for continuing to live. I am about to drown myself. I cannot swim. I have weighted my body with stones so that there will be no danger of failure in this, my last act. No one will mourn me. I hope no one will even look for me.

"John Brackenbone."

Roy stood for a long time, studying that scrap of sodden paper. Then he looked down at the smiling water as it washed in gentle ripples against the rocks.

He shook his head, gravely folded the slip of paper and put it in his pocket. In spite of his knowledge of the man's misdeeds, he felt an impulse of pity for him. After all, the note had a certain dignity, and Roy was willing to admit that suicide might not always be the act of a coward. It would take courage, for instance, for a man who could not swim to plunge into the deep water at the foot of those rocks with his body weighted with stones.

"I'd ask to be excused, myself," thought Roy.

The "put-put" of a motorboat on the lake aroused him to the need of haste if he hoped to get the news to the paper before someone else got ahead of him.

"A man like John Brackenbone can't disappear without creating a stir," he said to himself. "I happened to

get in first, but others may be here to-day or to-morrow."

He gathered up the hat and coat and made his way to the lower end of the island. Here he hailed an old fisherman who was out early on the lake and offered to pay well to be taken to Lakeport.

As the boat sped with him toward home Roy wondered what his father and "Old Cut-to-the-Bone" would say to the startling news he had to offer to the paper.

"It's a scoop, all right," he thought jubilantly. "And maybe Hen Feley won't be sore!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE SCOOP

REACHING Lakeport, Roy Stover jumped into a taxi and was whirled to the *Eagle* building.

His clothes were rumpled and his hands begrimed after his wild night on Cliff Island, but he cared little for that. He took the stairs in a few bounds and rushed into his father's office.

Mr. Stover looked up and started to his feet.

"Thank goodness, you're back, Roy!" he exclaimed. "Your mother's been greatly worried about you."

"Sorry," replied Roy. "Have someone call her up and tell her I'm all right. But, Dad, I've got a peach of a story. It'll make Lakeport rock when it comes out."

"Fine!" exclaimed his father, on the alert at once. "What is it? Did you find Brackenbone?"

"Brackenbone's dead," replied Roy. "Committed suicide."

"What?" Mr. Stover jumped.

"At least I think he did," modified Roy. "He left a note saying that he was going to drown himself and making a confession of fraud. I found his hat and

coat on the rocks. Call in Gardner, Dad. Have him clear the presses for an extra edition. Biggest exclusive story of the year."

Gardner was summoned at once, and to the two excited and eager auditors Roy poured out his story.

"Great!" ejaculated Gardner, shaken for once out of his usual sardonic attitude. "It'll shake this place to its foundations. Get busy at once and write it out. Spread yourself. I'll get up the headlines and we'll put it into type as fast as you can throw off the sheets. Golly, this will have the *News* people running round in circles!"

Roy settled himself at the typewriter and got busy. He was so stirred up and the incidents were so fresh in his mind that he dashed off a red-hot, rattling story, full of life and fire and sparkle, that was bound to hold the enthralled attention of readers from the first line to the last.

As fast as he wrote it the narrative was set up in type, and within a few minutes after the last word was written a host of newsboys, loaded with copies of the *Eagle* still warm from the press, were shouting their wares all over the town.

"Extry! Extry! Great Sensation! Brackenbone Suicide! Extry! Extry!"

The papers were fairly snatched from their hands and within an hour the whole town was rocking with the news, for John Brackenbone had been a prominent figure in the business and financial circles, and to most

of the citizens the news of his defalcation and suicide came like a thunderbolt.

Roy was the recipient of congratulations on every hand and was fairly mobbed wherever he appeared by those who were eager for further details. It was a great personal triumph for the young reporter and a tremendous scoop for the *Eagle*.

The *News*, of course, had not a word on the subject and was utterly flabbergasted by the victory of its rival. Its proprietors figuratively gnashed their teeth and tore their hair while Mr. Stover and Gardner shook hands, chuckled, and went about, faces wreathed in smiles.

"I'll say that was pretty clever work," was Mr. Stover's comment, delivered with considerable pride.

"It certainly was," came from Gardner with great heartiness. "To tell you the truth, I really didn't think it was in the boy. If he keeps on he'll have a great future."

"I guess we are both glad now, Gardner, that we let him come into the office as a cub reporter," chuckled the pleased father.

"We sure are," returned the editor heartily.

Hen Feley met Roy on the street and glowered at him.

"Why the frown, Hen?" asked Roy cheerfully. "It doesn't become your style of beauty."

"For dumb luck, you beat the world," growled Feley.

"I don't know about that," laughed Roy. "But it certainly beats the *News*. I suppose your people are tickled to death. Still, they can fill up their columns with something, even if it isn't what the people want."

"Don't rub it in," grumbled Feley. "They've already scalped me and they're thinking of burning me at the stake. You might have let a fellow in on it."

"Would you, if you had been in my place?" countered Roy.

"Well—" hesitated Feley.

"You know you wouldn't," chuckled Roy. "No quarter in the newspaper game, old man. But cheer up, Hen. It'll be your turn next time."

That afternoon the *Eagle* offices were deluged with requests from other papers and press associations for further details of the story, the dramatic features of which were instantly recognized by the men who knew what the public liked, and *Eagle* stock took a big bound upward in consequence.

Naturally, all the evidence in the case was turned over to the police authorities, who took up the matter at once and got busy on every detail of the case.

"Great work, old man!" said Lieutenant Dexter of the Lakeport police department. "I told you before and I tell you now that you ought to be a detective."

"And I told you before and I tell you now that I'd rather be a reporter," laughed Roy.

Dexter and a squad of his men went over with Roy that same afternoon to Cliff Island. There Roy went over the ground with them, explaining his actions dur-

ing the long and horror-filled night he had spent in the old stone mansion. He showed them the one-line scrawl left by Brackenbone on the library table. They forced the locked door of the study and found the lifeless body of the rattlesnake. He took them along the path to the cliff and showed them the exact spot where he had found the realtor's coat and hat. The story was circumstantial and, to the police mind, seemed to be conclusive.

The squad departed, firm in the conviction that John Brackenbone had committed suicide and that the case was at an end.

Roy, of course, had told them of the wild man, but neither Dexter nor the others seemed to attach much importance to that individual. Roy was not so sure that the man was negligible. He was rather piqued at the careless way in which that phase of the case was pushed to one side. Even his own father made light of the wild man episode.

"You were wrought up, Roy," he said. "In your excitement, this fellow, probably a mere loiterer on the island, looked worse to you than he really was. You don't mean to tell me that an honest-to-goodness, genuine, dyed-in-the-wool wild man inhabits Cliff Island?"

"Let the 'wild man' phrase go, Dad. I know it sounds rather melodramatic. But some sort of freak, a crazy man, a hermit—call him what you will—does live on the island. He may be a fugitive from justice, for all I know. That he was there on the island and

that I saw him twice almost as plainly as I see you now, I can assure you. Besides, there's that club that was thrown at me. Did I imagine that, too? Somebody threw it."

His father's face grew graver.

"True," he admitted. "Some tramp may have wanted to knock you out and rob you. The matter must be looked into and the man apprehended if he is still there. Speak to Dexter about it and have his men make a hunt for him."

Roy did so and another perfunctory search of the island was made without any trace of the man being discovered. The police, too, were of Mr. Stover's opinion that the man was just a tramp who had happened to be temporarily on the island and now had taken his departure. As to his having had any connection with the death of Brackenbone, this was dismissed by the police as wholly unlikely. Everything seemed clearly to point to suicide, and it was so accepted.

Roy admitted to himself that they might be right, so he did not urge any further the possibility that Brackenbone had died by the violence of another. But he was not wholly satisfied that the "Brackenbone case" had ended then and there.

The *News* the next day, of course, had to publish the main features of Roy's "beat." They would have gladly ignored it if they could, but that would have made them ridiculous. It was bitter medicine, and they did all they could to belittle the exploit, making

it seem as far as possible as though it were something upon which the young reporter had stumbled. Their only comfort was the 'wild man' episode, which they attributed simply to a case of rattles. They spread themselves on that and wondered sarcastically why the ghost of the dead hunter had not also put in an appearance on the scene.

But try as they would, they could not disguise the fact that they were swallowing a dose of bitter medicine. The *Eagle* had beaten them and beaten them badly, and all Lakeport knew it.

Roy grinned as he read the story.

"They die hard, don't they?" he remarked to his father.

"Yes," chuckled Mr. Stover. "They're mad enough to chew nails. We sure got the jump on them. But I shouldn't say 'we,' for you did it all. I'm proud of you, my boy."

There was another side to the picture. Roy's natural jubilation at the beat he had scored was dampened by the gloom cast over many Lakeport households by the news of John Brackenbone's suicide.

Not that they shed many bitter tears over his death itself. He left few mourners on that account. It was the news of his defalcation that came as a blow.

To many it threatened the loss of all their savings. For the most part it was those who could least bear it who were the heaviest losers. It was among this class that Brackenbone had chiefly operated and his

plausible schemes had prompted them to draw their money from the savings banks and put it into his hands.

Had the man lived, they might have forced some measure of restitution. To be sure, he had left some property, and this was being appraised by the proper authorities. But investigation soon disclosed that his house and grounds were mortgaged up to the hilt, and whatever other resources might be disclosed would probably not be enough to cover the cost of winding up his affairs.

Widespread misery existed in Lakeport, and Roy Stover's heart was saddened by evidences of wreck on which he came.

Roy went to see Victor Lawrence and found him walking the floor, fairly beside himself with worry. The young reporter was shocked at the man's appearance. He looked withered and shrunken.

"I'm a ruined man, Roy," said Mr. Lawrence. "Oh, that I'd never met that scoundrel and been misled by his oily tongue!"

Maizie came into the room just then, greeted Roy, and said soothingly to her father:

"John Brackenbone is dead, Father. A man must be pretty unhappy to commit suicide. He's had his punishment."

Mr. Lawrence only shook his head. His face and body sagged as he slumped into a chair.

"He's gone with my savings of years. What do I care if he's dead? That won't bring my money back."

The older man sank into a mood of despondency from which the young folks found it impossible to arouse him. They gave it up at last and went out into the garden at the back of the house to get a breath of fresh air and have a little uninterrupted conversation on the subject that engrossed their thoughts. Maizie's pretty face was very serious. There was a worried frown on her brow.

"You see how it is," she said, glancing appealingly at Roy. "He does nothing all day but fret about his loss and rave because he can't get his fingers on John Brackenbone's throat. I don't know what we're going to do with him. Sometimes I'm really afraid for his reason."

Her tone and the expression of her face alarmed the young reporter.

"Oh, come now, Maizie!" he expostulated. "It can't be as bad as that."

"But it is," the girl insisted. "Why, sometimes he sits for hours staring straight in front of him and muttering. And the look on his face frightens me. You see he worked so hard for that money, saving it dollar by dollar, going without things all these years, and now to see it all gone—oh, it's terrible!"

"Gee, that's tough! I'm awfully sorry for you, Maizie."

"You should be more sorry for him," said Maizie, with a crooked smile. "I'm young. I can get along. But father is well on in years and it's taken the heart out of him."

After an unhappy pause, she added:

"While John Brackenbone was alive there was some hope that he could be forced to straighten things out. Now that that terrible man is dead there isn't any hope at all."

"H'm," murmured Roy. "Now, I wonder."

Maizie glanced up at him swiftly.

"What made you say that?" she asked, puzzled.

"I didn't say anything," evaded Roy. "I was merely thinking aloud."

"Roy Stover, you know something you're trying to keep from me. Now, 'fess up."

"I don't know a thing," Roy answered. "To-morrow I'm going over to Cliff Island again and I was just wondering if I mightn't unearth something about Brackenbone that hasn't yet come to light."

Maizie's pretty brow puckered into a puzzled frown.

"I don't see what remains to be found out," she protested. "You know the man is dead, don't you?"

"Circumstantial evidence points that way," admitted Roy. "Still, they haven't found the body, you know."

"If it was weighted with stones, they wouldn't."

"They wouldn't be apt to," Roy acknowledged, and refused to be drawn out further.

When he said good-by to the girl an hour or so later he promised to do all he could to help her father.

"Something is bound to turn up," he tried to console her. "You keep an eye on Fate. I'll bet she has a surprise for you in store yet."

"Of the wrong sort, I'm afraid," said Maizie disconsolately, and turned back to the house and her distracted father.

Roy walked slowly homeward, pondering the case of John Brackenbone.

"I've a card or two up my sleeve that hasn't been played yet," he said to himself.

A considerable party, including his father, went over to Cliff Island the next day. Most of them made at once for the old house, but Roy did not accompany them.

"I'd rather browse about in the woods for a time and see if I can pick up a thing or two the police may have overlooked," he told his father.

"Knowing our local police, that's quite possible," said Mr. Stover, with a smile. "Go to it, Roy, and see if you can startle Lakeport with another sensation. You're getting good at it."

"I'll try to rout out my wild man," said Roy. "If I don't, people will begin to think I've gone balmy myself."

"A lot of people think that already," put in Hen Feley, who had joined the party.

Roy deigned no reply to this bit of persiflage. He waited till the others had disappeared in the direction of the house, then plunged into the woods. He had spoken jokingly to his father about the "wild man," but he was in dead earnest. The incredulity with which his reference to that individual had been met had put him on his mettle.

The young reporter had threaded the woods for perhaps half an hour when he came unexpectedly on the person he wanted to see.

From behind a tree a fantastic figure emerged. While Roy stared, fascinated, a bony finger beckoned to him.

Roy fingered his automatic and advanced slowly, fearing a trick. When he was some twenty feet from the grotesque, bearded figure, the man suddenly ducked and disappeared.

With an exasperated cry, Roy darted forward. As he did so the ground gave way beneath his feet. He felt himself falling!

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE PIT

DOWN Roy Stover went, his senses in a tumult, not knowing where or when he might land.

He found out when he struck with a sickening thump. He had fallen among a mass of twigs and leaves at the bottom of an excavation. These, he thought, had fallen with him. He looked up and saw the rim of the pit about ten feet above.

He understood at once what had happened to him. He had fallen neatly into a trap set by the wild man. This hole had been dug and the underbrush arranged over it in such a manner as to resemble solid earth. The wild man knew of the existence of this hole, had probably dug it himself.

Roy got painfully to his feet. He was bruised by the fall and severely scratched about the hands and face. The chief wound, however, was to his self-esteem.

"I'll bet that fellow is hanging around somewhere snickering his fool head off," he muttered. "If I could get my hands on him right now I'd give him something that would stop his laughing."

The thought that his enemy was in all probability lingering in the neighborhood and enjoying his discomfiture intensified the young reporter's natural desire to get out of the pit as soon as possible.

"No knowing what that fellow may do. He could stone me to death while I'm in here."

It was a comparatively easy matter to scramble out of the pit. As Roy stood on the edge of it, looking ruefully down at what he could see of himself, he knew that he presented a sorry spectacle.

His clothes were covered with dirt, twigs, and burrs. There was a triangular rent in one trouser leg. His hands were criss-crossed with scratches.

"Now if I could get a squint at my face, the picture would be complete," he grumbled.

He wondered how he was going to face the group that had accompanied him to the island—especially Hen Feley with his pungent and highly disrespectful comments. The thought fanned his anger against the wild man who was responsible for his predicament. He looked about him vengefully.

"I'll find that crazy thing if it's the last thing I do," he promised himself.

He was about to begin his search when his foot struck against something hard. He looked down and immediately forgot about the wild man.

At his feet lay a cigar lighter, monogram side up.

Roy picked it up and turned it over and over in his hands, examining it with the most intense interest. Although its surface was marred by exposure to the

elements, Roy could see that it was an expensive trinket.

The monogram, a large J.B., interested him most.

"So John Brackenbone has passed this way!"

Roy looked from the lighter in his hand to the pit from which he had just escaped.

"I wonder if Brackenbone, too, fell into a pit, one dug by a crank or a madman and one from which he never emerged alive? It's a thought, anyway, and one worth pondering over."

He searched the underbrush near the pit carefully in the hope of unearthing a clue of even greater importance to his investigation than the cigar lighter.

He found a place some four feet square close by where the underbrush had been separated, bushes broken, and the ground trampled.

It took no great effort of imagination to visualize this as the scene of a struggle of some kind, the outcome of which could not be determined.

"It seems to me," he mused, "that the case against the wild man has been considerably strengthened during the last half hour. Now, if I could just persuade some one to believe in his existence, the investigation might move forward. Which makes me more determined than ever to produce him if humanly possible."

Finding nothing else of interest in the immediate vicinity of the pit, Roy Stover extended his search further into the woods. But he saw nothing of the wild man nor of anything else that might help in the solution of the Brackenbone mystery.

At the end of a fruitless hour of hunting, a faint halloo warned him that his party had finished its visit and was getting ready to return to Lakeport.

"I'll go along with them now," Roy told himself. "But in a day or two I'm coming back to stay. I'll not leave Cliff Island again until I've found out a few things I want desperately to know."

Before rejoining his party, Roy brushed his clothes and removed the burrs that clung to them. He found a small stream and washed his face and hands. He could do nothing about the triangular rent in his trousers. He let this go, hoping that his companions would be too full of their visit to notice it.

He found his father and the others glum and inclined to be taciturn. The gloom of the old house had depressed their spirits. It had yielded nothing to their eager search. They were as much in the dark as they had been before.

"I guess the police are right," Mr. Stover surmised. "It begins to look like an open and shut case of suicide."

"Keep an open mind, Dad," counseled Roy, as he reached into his pocket.

There was a stir when he produced the cigar lighter. It was passed from hand to hand and each had suggestions to offer. On one point they all, with the exception of Roy, agreed. That was that Roy's find did nothing to weaken materially the suicide theory.

"It isn't hard to imagine the realtor taking a stroll in the woods and in the course of his walk dropping or

mislaying his cigar lighter," Hen Feley contended. "I've done it more than once myself," he added, with a grin.

"The lighter is an expensive one," Roy pointed out. "It's hard to imagine John Brackenbone with his reputation for thrift, almost miserliness, carelessly mislaying an article of such value. It's easier for me to believe that some sort of scuffle took place there and in the course of the scuffle the lighter was dropped."

"But if there was no sign of a fight——"

"There was," interrupted Roy. "Close to where I found the lighter the bushes were broken and the ground trampled. Come along, I'll show you."

They trailed after him, more impressed than they cared to show, though Hen Feley could not refrain from mentioning that perhaps the scuffle had been with the ghost of the dead hunter.

Roy showed them the pit, neglecting to state that he had fallen into it, and pointed out the evidence of struggle. This silenced their scoffing, at least.

"The police must know of this," said Mr. Stover. "Better turn over the lighter to them, Roy."

"I intended to in any case," Roy replied.

He did not add that there was one clue he did not intend to turn over to the police—not yet.

That night Roy had an earnest conversation with his father. They met in the library after dinner. They had the house to themselves, for Mrs. Stover had gone to a church guild meeting and Nell was at the theater with Joe Williamson.

Mr. Stover glanced up from his book.

"You want to talk to me, Son? I suppose it's about the Brackenbone case."

Roy nodded as he slipped into a seat.

"I handed over the cigar lighter to the police and told them about the evidence of struggle," Roy said. "As a consequence they're going to work for a while on a murder theory."

"In that case," murmured Mr. Stover thoughtfully, "it may make trouble for some people in Lakeport."

"What do you mean, Dad?"

"Well, if a man is murdered it's usually done by some enemy," replied Mr. Stover. "Brackenbone was an unscrupulous man, as you know. He made many enemies. Suspicion would naturally fall on some one of these enemies. There are several citizens of Lakeport who had cause enough to wish John Brackenbone dead."

Roy was startled.

"Motive might be shown in several people who come to my mind," pursued his father slowly. "Those who had made threats against him would naturally come under the eye of the police. You told me of Nicholas Raymond, for instance, and his remark that if Brackenbone weren't careful he'd end in a cemetery."

"By George, I'd forgotten that!" exclaimed Roy. "But of course that was a remark made in a moment of anger. There was nothing behind it."

"Of course not," agreed his father. "You and I know that Nick Raymond wouldn't hurt a fly. But the

police would be apt to remember that many a worthy, mild-mannered man has killed in a moment of uncontrollable anger. Then, too, there's Victor Lawrence——”

“Maizie's father!” cried Roy. “It's impossible! Still, he might be suspected.”

“Exactly. He's been heard to threaten Brackenbone on more than one occasion. Besides, there are witnesses to prove that Lawrence once made a violent attack on Brackenbone and tried to choke him. Only the interference of Con Casey pulled him off. You were there and saw it. You even helped Casey part the two men. Lawrence told you afterward, didn't he, that ‘someone ought to kill that skunk?’”

Roy looked thoroughly miserable. He fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

“Do you think I'd be called on to testify?” he asked.

“In all probability you will if the matter ever gets that far. At any rate, Victor Lawrence would certainly seem one of the most promising suspects the case would develop. And if he's once arrested the police will try to pin it upon him.”

In his agitation Roy Stover flung himself out of the chair and began to stride about the room.

“Gee, that's tough on Maizie! Her father is half out of his mind already over his losses. That would be the finishing stroke. Poor Maizie!”

“And poor Victor Lawrence,” put in Mr. Stover. “You youngsters only think of each other.”

"You don't believe he did it, Dad?"

"No. Do you?"

Roy shook his head. He sat down again, stretched his long legs out in front of him and regarded the tips of his shoes with great concentration.

"I don't believe anyone did it," he said at last.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MISSING MOTORBOAT

"WHAT?" Mr. Stover looked at the half-recumbent figure of his son with astonishment. "I thought you were quite set on the murder theory."

Roy shook his head.

"Then you believe that John Brackenbone committed suicide after all?"

Again Roy shook his head.

"Listen, Dad. There are three possible theories in this case, and each is supported by quite a lot of evidence."

"I see only two," replied Mr. Stover. "Either Brackenbone killed himself or somebody else killed him."

"No, there's a third one," said the young reporter. "I'll come to that in a minute. Each one of the three looks plausible. I admit that I'm torn between them. Sometimes one appeals to me most. Then I find myself switching to another. I'm trying to keep an open mind."

"That's the only way if you expect to reach the truth," commented Mr. Stover.

"Now, take the suicide theory," went on Roy.

"That, on the face of things, seems the strongest. There's the note on the library table, the coat and hat on the rocks with the other note pinned to the coat. We know that three handwriting experts to which we submitted them agreed that they're in Brackenbone's handwriting. We know, also, that Brackenbone was finding things getting hot for him, was in desperate financial circumstances, the same circumstances under which thousands of men have killed themselves. Looks pretty strong, doesn't it?"

"It surely does," agreed his father. "It's the one I'm inclined to favor."

"Against that is the fact that they haven't yet found the body," observed Roy.

"No, but they're searching for it. It may be brought to light at any time."

"All right," went on Roy. "Now as to the murder theory. That, too, has serious support. There's the fact, as you've just said, that there are plenty of people who had reasons for wishing Brackenbone dead. Some are known to have uttered threats against him. More important still is the fact that there is a man with murderous instincts at large on Cliff Island."

"Your 'wild man,'" put in Mr. Stover, with a smile.

"Don't laugh, Dad," implored Roy. "It's no joke. The man is there. I saw him again this afternoon."

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Stover, his amused look vanishing. "You didn't tell me about it."

"No," replied Roy, "because of all those others

around. I didn't tell you, either, that he trapped me into falling into a pit in which I might have broken a leg or my neck."

Mr. Stover sat up straight.

"The scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "We've got to have him arrested."

"I thought that would take the smile off your face," remarked Roy, with a certain sense of unfilial satisfaction. "The man, I think, is a maniac. But whether he is or not, he has the instinct to kill. He tried to kill or maim me when he hurled the club at me the first time I went there. He tried to do the same thing this afternoon."

"But what can be his motive?" queried Mr. Stover.

"Does a crazy man have to have a motive?" countered Roy. "In my case, he certainly didn't have a justifiable one. I'd never done him any harm. He probably had never seen me before. In his twisted mind he may simply have felt that the island belonged to him and that he had as much right to kill me as the householder has to kill the burglar that invades his home. But the fact remains that he tried to kill or injure me. If he felt that way about me, why may he have not felt the same way about Brackenbone, another intruder on *his* island?"

"True," murmured Mr. Stover.

"Of course, in Brackenbone's case he might have had a further reason," went on Roy. "He may be a man whom Brackenbone had tricked and ruined, as he has so many others. He may have killed him out of

revenge. But whether or not, the fact remains that this homicidal maniac had the opportunity to murder. He and Brackenbone were alone on the island. And there's that pit and the cigar lighter near it and the signs of a struggle. If he once pushed Brackenbone into the pit, it would have been an easy matter to kill him with rocks, pull out the body afterward and dispose of it."

"You certainly make out a strong case for the murder theory," admitted Mr. Stover.

"I'm not trying to make out a case," explained Roy. "I'm only trying to arrange the facts and see where they lead. There are some things against the murder theory as well as for it. There are the notes, for instance. If the wild man killed Brackenbone, he must have written the notes, too."

"That's the weak point," mused Mr. Stover. "That such a man as you describe—ragged, crazed or half-crazed, probably illiterate—could so perfectly imitate the handwriting of Brackenbone as to deceive trained handwriting experts is taxing credulity pretty heavily."

"It is the weak point," admitted Roy readily. "But it isn't necessarily conclusive. The man, whatever his condition now, may formerly have been an educated man and a skilled penman. The handwriting experts are sometimes deceived and the cunning of maniacs is proverbial. But even admitting that it eliminates the wild man from the case, it doesn't destroy the possibility of murder. Someone else, better qualified to forge writing, may have killed Brackenbone."

"That's true. Well, there are the two theories—murder or suicide. You said you had a third one. What is it?"

"That Brackenbone didn't commit suicide and wasn't killed. That he's still alive."

Mr. Stover jumped out of his chair.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"That he's still alive," repeated Roy.

Mr. Stover slowly settled back into his seat.

"Of course, in the absence of the body, that's possible," he admitted. "But the proof to the contrary is so strong that——"

"Of course it's strong," interrupted Roy. "A cunning rascal would take pains to make it strong. This is just a theory, and the production of the body would knock it into flinders. But, in the absence of the body, it remains at least a possibility."

"Fire ahead," urged his father. "Tell me why."

"Well, in the first place there's the matter of the cigar butts."

"What about them?"

"There were too many of them, Dad. And in at least two cases they had hardly been smoked at all. A match was touched to the end of the cigar, a few puffs taken, and the rest of an expensive cigar flung away. It doesn't seem natural to me unless the cigars had been deliberately planted to point the way to something else."

"A straw hat, for instance, and a coat with a suicide's note pinned to the lapel," interjected Mr. Stover.

"You've got it, Dad. He wanted those things to be found. If the theory is right—and of course I wouldn't bet too much on it—Brackenbone was planning to disappear. He knew that the disappearance would be investigated, and he planted the note I found in the library and the cigar butts I found along the path to lead the investigators to an abandoned hat and coat and a second suicide note which he had planted with equal care among the rocks above the water."

"Go on," urged Mr. Stover, eyeing his son intently as the latter paused for a moment.

"Brackenbone had ample motive to want to mislead the police and the public in regard to his disappearance," continued Roy. "He admitted that he was in default of fifty thousand dollars. We've learned since that it is more nearly a hundred thousand. Suppose he wanted to get away with this loot. What better way than to play dead, to pretend that he had committed suicide? The search for him would naturally end there and he would be left to enjoy his ill-gotten-gains—in a foreign country, perhaps—in peace and without fear of the law. That, I think, is the way he would figure it."

"But the remorse he seemed to indicate in his note—" objected Mr. Stover.

"Mere camouflage. Another instance of the man's cunning. I don't believe John Brackenbone ever felt a twinge of remorse in his life. He was as hard as stone, ruthless and cruel. No, he certainly wouldn't have taken his life because he felt sorry for his dupes."

"But he may have been desperate on his own account," replied Mr. Stover. "His fortune gone——"

"It wasn't gone. To be sure, his estate was mortgaged to the limit, but that's all been done recently and he hasn't had time to spend the money he raised on the mortgages. Besides, he's had the money he swindled the Lakeport people out of for that development of his."

"But some of that money may have been tied up in the tract he was going to develop."

"He didn't even own the tract," declared Roy. "That's something I found out yesterday, Dad, and meant to tell you about. I looked up the records and found that instead of buying the tract he'd only paid a few hundred dollars for an option on it. Even the option had expired. When he got the money from these poor people he pretended that he owned the tract outright and that their money was to be used only in its development. No sir, practically every dollar he's swindled people out of he had in his possession—liquid cash—on the day he went over to Cliff Island."

"An infernal scoundrél!" exclaimed Mr. Stover. He was silent for a moment, pondering deeply. "The theory is certainly ingenious, Roy," he said at last. "But I can't see that it's any better than that of murder or suicide. Each of the three has its strong points. Of course, if the body isn't found——"

"That's another point," put in Roy eagerly. "Why did he say in his note that he was going to weight his body with stones?"

"Why?" countered Mr. Stover. "You tell me."

"To explain the non-appearance of the body later on," replied Roy. "In the natural course of things the body would have risen to the surface after a day or two and, with so many boats on the lake, would certainly have been found floating. If it weren't found, people wouldn't believe he'd drowned himself. As it is, they tell themselves that's he's drowned all right, but the stones hold the body down."

"I'll admit I never thought of that," murmured Mr. Stover. "You've certainly got a head on you, my boy."

"I've still an ace up my sleeve that mustn't be breathed about, Dad," said Roy slowly. "I haven't seen it mentioned by anybody yet and it may have in it the material for a beat."

"That would be great," said Mr. Stover, his professional instincts stirred. "What is it?"

"What about John Brackenbone's motorboat, the *Challenge*?"

"Well, what about it?"

"John Brackenbone is known to have set out in the *Challenge* to go to Cliff Island. Isn't that so?"

"Jan Weber at the dock says so. He claims to have been the last person to see Brackenbone alive."

"That was on the morning of the day that he is supposed to have committed suicide."

"We can accept that as a fact," agreed his father.

"All right. Then, if John Brackenbone ran the motorboat to Cliff Island and afterward drowned himself, what became of the motorboat?"

"I begin to see your point," Mr. Stover confessed. "The *Challenge* has not been found, has it?"

"Neither at the island nor anywhere near it," replied Roy. "May not the answer be that John Brackenbone did not commit suicide? That he was not murdered? That he went to the island, carefully planted his evidence, then used the *Challenge* to make his escape?"

It was Mr. Stover's turn to get up and pace about the room. Roy watched him eagerly.

"Well, what do you say, Dad?"

"You may be on the right track, Son. Your reasoning is logical, and that point about the motorboat certainly needs explaining." He paused, struck by a thought. "If John Brackenbone was murdered, the murderer, of course, might have used the boat to effect his escape."

"I've thought of that," admitted Roy. "But still I think my idea is the more likely."

"You'll have to produce your man to prove it."

"I know."

"How do you intend to go about it?"

Roy Stover hesitated; then turned to his father with an apologetic smile.

"I'm going to be nervy, Dad. I want a few days of absence from the paper and no questions asked."

Mr. Stover chuckled.

"I've found that the days off I give you are more fruitful than any other for the *Eagle*," he said. "Go

ahead, Roy. I'll fix it up with Gardner. But produce your man."

"Alive or dead?"

"Dead or alive—but preferably alive. A great many would be glad to see Brackenbone in the flesh. But for goodness' sake, Roy, be careful! If Brackenbone really lives, as you think, he'll be desperate if you discover him."

"I'll be careful, Dad. But don't say 'as you think.' I don't feel at all sure of it. I realize that that's only one of three possibilities. To-morrow I may be hot for the murder theory, the next day for the suicide idea. It all depends on what I'm able to turn up. I'm not anxious to establish any theory. All I want is to find out the truth."

Early the next morning Roy Stover went in search of Elmer Raymond. He found that lad just out of his morning tub.

"Cliff Island!" he exclaimed, after Roy had stated his errand. "Do you mean that after what you've endured in that place you want to go there again?"

"For an indefinite period," replied Roy. "You see, I've got to find out what happened to Brackenbone."

"Gee, the fellow committed suicide, didn't he?"

"Did he?"

Elmer gave his friend a disgusted look.

"All I have to say is that some folks haven't the sense to leave well enough alone," he declared, as he laced his shoes. "Well, let me get a bite and a cup of coffee and I'm with you."

On the way to Cliff Island Elmer asked a number of questions, all of which were neatly parried by the young reporter for the *Eagle*.

"Mysterious, aren't you?" snorted Elmer. "Just like a regular detective."

"I tell you what, Elmer," Roy compromised finally. "As soon as I find out anything of importance I'll tell you first of all about the whole thing. How'll that suit you?"

"Honest Injun?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Well, beggars can't be choosers, and I'll have to take what I can get. But say, Roy, why do you suppose the cops are horning in on my father's affairs, taking a sudden interest in him?"

"Are they?" asked Roy, with a quickening of attention.

"Nothing else but," affirmed Elmer. "They're hanging about the dock and asking all sorts of questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"About Brackenbone," was the answer.

"Oh, well," said Roy carelessly. "They're doing that to lots of people. They've asked me a good many, too. They know that Brackenbone kept his boat here. Maybe they think your dad knew something of his movements, his sailing trips and the like. They've got to make a show of activity, you know. But here we are already. The old bus made good time. So long, old man."

"So long," replied Elmer, as Roy Stover leaped ashore, "and look out for the rattlers."

"You can bet I'll keep my eyes peeled," Roy called back in response to Elmer's warning.

"I'll be here to-morrow morning at about this time in case you've had enough of Cliff Island," said Elmer, as he pushed off.

"That's good of you," replied Roy gratefully. "But make it day after to-morrow. I'll probably be here two days at least."

He waited till the motorboat had backed into deeper water. Then, with a parting wave of the hand to his friend, he shouldered the hamper of lunch, enough for several days, that he had brought with him and with a thrill of excitement plunged into the woods.

CHAPTER XX

THE BLOW FROM BEHIND

So THE police were already questioning Nicholas Raymond, Roy Stover thought as he trudged along through the woods. No doubt Victor Lawrence was also being subjected to inquisition. He sighed as he thought of the mantle of gloom enveloping the Lawrence family. Poor Maizie!

The young reporter had no definite plan of procedure. More than anything else, he had a strong longing to meet the wild man face to face. He had a score to settle with the fellow. Besides this, he believed that the man knew things about John Brackenbone that might prove helpful in this present undertaking.

Remembering the mysterious appearances and disappearances of his dangerous adversary, Roy Stover trod warily, keeping a sharp lookout to right and left as he went.

When he was nearing the shore of the other side of the island, he was surprised to hear voices. Surprise rapidly gave place to irritation. He had hoped to have the island to himself for the next few days, if it should

prove advisable to stay that long. Who could the intruders be?

Determined to find an answer to the question, he left the shelter of the woods and stepped out to the edge of the cliff.

The sun was bright on the water, and he shaded his eyes to get a better view.

There were a number of boats and men doing strange things to the water at the foot of the cliff. It took Roy only a moment to read reason into the unusual performance.

"They are dragging the lake," he told himself. "If John Brackenbone has been murdered, his body has to be found. No corpse, no trial. But I have a hunch that they can drag the lake from end to end and not find the body."

Realizing that he was in full view and might at any moment be discovered, the young reporter stepped back into the shelter of the woods.

He was annoyed to find others on the island when he had hoped to have it to himself. However, he knew that there was nothing to do but to accept the situation.

"They have a perfect right to come here, I suppose," was the way he reasoned. "In fact, in one way the police have more of a right than I have. It will simply be a question of who solves the mystery first."

The young reporter walked slowly through the woods, looking ahead and to the right and the left

as he proceeded. Once he saw a small rabbit leap out into a clearing, look at him in amazement, and then dart out of sight.

"Rabbit hunting might be pretty good up here in the winter time," thought Roy. "However, I'm not hunting that sort of game just now."

Further on in the woodland depths, he found a place that could be made to serve him excellently as a make-shift camp. This was merely a huge pile of rocks under the overhanging ledges of which he could be sheltered from observation.

Here he deposited his lunch hamper, covering it carefully with leaves and twigs so that anyone coming that way might mistake it for part of the undergrowth.

Then he set off on his search for any possible clues that might help unravel the mystery. He was especially anxious to find the *Challenge*.

Almost without his volition, his steps led him in the direction of the pit into which he had been lured by the wild man.

He found the hole cunningly disguised again with underbrush. He regarded it speculatively, wondering why the man had taken the trouble to disguise the trap again.

"He certainly didn't think I'd be fool enough to walk into it again," Roy ruminated. "Once bitten, twice shy."

There was a slight sound behind him. He turned quickly, but not quickly enough. Something struck

him a stunning blow on the head and he felt himself sinking into darkness ten thousand fathoms deep!

Roy Stover never knew how long he lay there before he came to himself. He was aware of a ringing in his ears and a horrible headache. He put his hand to his head and found there a lump as big as a robin's egg. His arms and legs felt numb, but when he moved them he found that they answered to his will readily enough.

He sat up, his head swimming dizzily.

"Serves me right for not keeping a better lookout," he chided himself. "I just begged for that."

He put his hands in his pockets. None of his belongings had been disturbed. His money and watch were safe and his pistol had not been taken.

"The wild man may be a thug and a would-be murderer, but he isn't a thief," Roy thought. "Gee, how my head aches! I hope my skull isn't fractured. It's no fault of that madman if it isn't."

He got to his feet and staggered about dizzily. His fingers sought his pistol and grasped the butt. It would have fared ill with his enemy if the young reporter had caught sight of him just then.

Roy tried to get his bearings. His thought was to get to the lake and bathe his head in the cold water in the hope of relieving the intolerable ache. But in his half-stupefied condition he could not tell the direction.

His feet dragged. Again and again he tripped and almost fell. Finally he did fall headlong, plunging

through a clump of bushes that partly broke the effect of the fall.

He was about to gather himself up when he saw before him the yawning mouth of a cave. The bushes had formed a perfect screen for the entrance to the cave. Roy would never have suspected its existence had his fall not landed him just where it did.

Instantly his interest quickened. He forgot the ache in his head. A cave! Was it natural or artificial? And if artificial, who had made it and why?

He quickly satisfied himself that it had been dug by human hands. The earthen sides had been hammered smooth with a shovel, and as he brushed the leaves aside that lay scattered on the floor, he could discern the marks of footprints.

Was it the dwelling of the wild man? If so, was the man himself, perhaps, crouched in the shadows at the back, watching the intruder at the entrance?

Whether he was or not, Roy Stover determined to explore the cave.

He drew his flashlight and sent the beams of the torch into the darkness. They revealed nothing except the dirt side walls.

One thing though was certain. The cave was deeper than he thought. He could not perceive any back wall.

The place was not high enough for him to stand upright. He would have to crawl on hands and knees.

Flashlight in one hand, pistol in the other, the young reporter entered the cave. He found the underground air stifling as he wormed and thrust his way along.

He did not know at what moment he might butt his head against a solid barrier of earth.

As he went farther along it burst upon him that this was not a cave, but a tunnel. It was practically of uniform size throughout.

Where did that passage lead? What or whom would he find at the other end of it?

Suddenly the tunnel widened, the air became more breathable. Roy stretched a hand above his head. Finding that it encountered nothing, he decided that it was safe to stand upright.

He did this carefully and was rewarded for his caution. His head came gently against something solid. He felt this with his hand and found it was wood.

"I've come out beneath a building of some sort," he murmured to himself. "Now, what to do next?"

Flashing his light in a wide circle about him, the young reporter found himself in a rude dirt cellar, littered with empty boxes, shells, broken tools and other worthless junk.

In the wood flooring above him Roy made a discovery far more important to him. It was a trapdoor.

"It will probably be bolted," he thought.

But, rather to his surprise, the door yielded readily. Almost too easily, Roy thought.

He pushed back the trap cautiously and daylight filtered into the cellar.

Roy waited for sounds in the room above, but, hearing nothing, cautiously thrust his head through

the opening. The room was empty. Roy Stover drew himself up and looked swiftly around him. His automatic was in his hand. From now on, he intended to run no chances.

The room was poorly furnished, and Roy recognized it as the interior of the cabin that he had passed on his first visit to Cliff Island when he had been on the way to the old stone house.

Looking at a shabby coat hanging over the back of a chair, Roy soliloquized:

"I'll bet this is where my friend, the wild man, hangs out. That cellar and underground tunnel give him a splendid getaway. Doubtless the old scoundrel burrowed down there while the police were searching the island, trying to smoke him out."

There was one other door in the shack besides the one that led into the open.

Roy strode to it and flung it wide. It revealed a woodshed, containing nothing but a few sticks scattered untidily over the floor. There were two cobwebbed windows in the place and Roy went to each in turn, peering out cautiously.

Seeing no one, he began a hurried ransacking of the cabin. He looked into the pocket of the shabby coat first, finding nothing but a few pieces of string, some odd-shaped stones, a fishhook, and a handful of bright red berries.

"Queer old dick, all right," Roy murmured, as he restored the possessions. "Mad as a hatter!"

He looked into the cook stove, turned over the old

dirty mattress on the bunk, and was about to give up the search as useless when something in the corner of the room caught his eye.

It was the rusted handle of an old hunting knife, and it was sticking up from a crack in the floor.

There was a gleam in Roy's eye as he tugged to release the knife. It resisted for a moment, and then came loose so suddenly that he almost lost his balance.

The blade of the knife had a razor edge and it was covered with red stains!

CHAPTER XXI

PADDING FOOTSTEPS

THAT those stains on the hunting knife were of blood, Roy Stover had not the slightest doubt. He looked at them with fascinated horror.

Whose blood had stained that blade?

"Looks like a real clue at last," the young reporter muttered, as he put the knife in his pocket. "It looks as though I had the goods on the old fellow. That is, if the chemist's analysis proves that they're human bloodstains."

Once more the murder theory seemed to be in the ascendant. That knife was an ominous sign. Villain as he had proved himself to be, Roy Stover had a thought of pity for John Brackenbone, done to death, perhaps, by a madman.

"I've got to run the wild man to earth," he told himself. "I have a double motive now. If I can prove that he's the murderer, I'll lift the cloud of suspicion from Nicholas Raymond and Victor Lawrence. And won't Maizie be glad!"

His thoughts recurred to the men dragging the lake.

"If that body proves to have stab wounds, it will

help round out the evidence," he thought. "Of course, if Brackenbone was murdered the body may not be in the lake. It might have been buried on the island."

Roy Stover determined that in his further search he would keep a sharp lookout for any place where the earth seemed to have been disturbed.

Starting with the lower end of the island, with his pistol ever ready at hand, the young reporter hunted through the woods systematically. But the quarry was very hard to run to earth. The ghost of the dead hunter could not have been more elusive.

Roy had the uncanny feeling that all the time he was being watched, that the fantastic creature he was looking for was having a quiet chuckle at his expense. The thought was irritating, maddening.

"It's just as if I were in some jungle with a crazy baboon watching me," thought the young newspaper man. "Gee, I wish I could get my hands on him."

Roy moved forward rather slowly, for he had no desire to risk another attack. Once or twice he thought he saw a face peering at him from behind a tree or over the tops of some distant bushes. But each time when he reached the spot he found no one there.

In thus moving forward, the young reporter made a sort of semicircle and presently found himself coming out once more toward the lake shore.

"Oh, hang it all! I'm getting myself all twisted up," he muttered impatiently. "What's the matter with me, anyhow? If this sort of thing keeps on I'd

better go back to the office and ask them to assign me for interviews at the old ladies' home. A fine sort of top-notch reporter I'm getting to be."

He set out once more and this time straight in the direction which he had followed earlier in the day.

Reaching the cache where he had left his lunch, he was reminded that he was hungry, a fact that he had overlooked in the things that engrossed his mind. He sat down to refresh himself with sandwiches and the hot coffee he had brought in a thermos bottle.

The young reporter had barely begun his meal when he noticed that the sky had become overcast. Black clouds were spreading rapidly from the east. There was a sound of distant thunder.

Roy did not wish to be drenched, and as the first heavy drops began to fall he made his decision. He gathered up his lunch hamper and proceeded on a loping run to the old stone house.

"I can't give it much praise as a habitation," he muttered, as he raced along; "but it's better than the woods in the rain. Besides, I had made up my mind, anyway, to go over it again."

The door was locked, but Roy had procured the key from Dexter, so he entered the shadow-filled hall of the sinister mansion.

Memory of his former experiences in the place came back to the young reporter in a flood. He felt again that sensation of horror, of being beset with forces that he could not understand or combat.

The blood-stained hunting knife in his pocket took

on a new and deadly significance. Suppose it had been used here by the murderer! Suppose John Brackenbone had been done to death in this house!

A loud clap of thunder made him jump. He berated himself angrily:

"It's ridiculous to let my nerves get the better of me like this. What if John Brackenbone was murdered here? That isn't going to hurt me any."

His self-chiding broke off abruptly. This time he had heard something that was not thunder nor the pattering of wind-blown gusts of rain on the porch outside.

This was within the house, and it was unmistakable. It was the pattering of bare feet in one of the rooms overhead!

That eerie sound froze the young reporter's blood and made him for a moment incapable of action. He stood there, every sense strained, impatient with the thunder for making it difficult for him to follow that faint pattering.

The light footsteps had seemed far away at first. Now they came closer. They seemed to enter the upper hall.

With a tingling of the scalp, Roy Stover realized that the maker of those padding steps had only to look over the railing of the upper hall to get a good view of him.

The thought was sufficiently unpleasant to restore to Roy the lost power in his legs. He took advantage

of this boon to hasten across the hall and conceal himself behind the library door.

There he waited, holding his breath, while the ghostly footsteps slowly descended the stairs.

The "ghost" took its time. It did not hurry, but ambled down the broad stairway in most leisurely fashion.

Roy waited till he judged it should have reached the last step, then peered around the library door.

A shout of triumph broke from him and he flung himself into the hall.

Here at hand was the person he had been so persistently seeking! Here was his 'wild man' in the flesh!

More than that, it was an absolutely confused wild man that faced Roy as he made his dash across the hall. It was plain that the fantastic old fellow had had no warning of Roy's presence in the house.

He turned now and tried to scramble up the stairs, but Roy was too quick and too strong for him.

"No, you don't!" he cried. "I've got you now, and you can bet I'm not going to let you go until you've explained a few things. Now then, come in here. You might as well give up struggling, because you're in for a little special inquisition, whether you like it or not."

The grotesque creature leered up at Roy Stover as he twisted and squirmed in the young reporter's grasp. Roy felt as though he had inadvertently picked up a

snake. He grimaced with distaste as his fingers tightened on the greasy, tattered coat of the man.

"No sense to try to get away," said Roy. "I won't let you go. I'm going to have the truth from you, or——"

"What'll you do? What'll you do?" the old fellow gibbered at him, doing a crazy caper. "Go ahead. Tell me. If I won't give you the truth, what'll you do?"

The man's manner, his look, made Roy's flesh creep. He had seldom seen crazy people, but he knew he was looking at one now. The wild eyes that showed forth now fear, now cunning, now sly ferocity, slipped over the furnishings of the room, over Roy, over the doors and windows, without ever coming to rest in one place.

They were mad eyes, and they gave Roy Stover a thrill of mingled repulsion and pity. He felt convinced that the moment he relinquished his hold of the bony shoulder in the tattered coat the man would be off, slipping as swiftly and silently as a rattlesnake from the house and into the shelter of the woods.

"What'll you do? What'll you do?" jeered the old fellow again.

Roy remembered that he had heard that the best way to deal with crazy people was to humor them. His grim look relaxed, and he said in a gentler tone:

"I won't do anything if you'll just be reasonable and tell me a few things I want to know. Will you?"

The wild eyes became very sly. The loose mouth twisted into a terrible grin.

"What d'you want to know? What d'you want to know?" he chanted in a sing-song tone.

"This is horrible," thought Roy.

Bargaining with this madman, the young reporter felt that he had slipped off solid ground entirely and was floundering about in a treacherous bog that was trying to drag him down. The madman's mind was the black bog. Why appeal to reason where there was none?

Fighting off his repulsion and forcing his voice to an easy conversational tone, Roy said:

"Well, in the first place, why do you hold a grudge against me? I've never done anything to you, yet three times you have tried to injure me. I wish you'd tell me what I've done to you to make you hate me so."

Into the madman's eyes crept a look of sly ferocity that made Roy's blood run cold. It was a vindictive, fiendish look. At that moment Roy Stover felt sure that the demented old derelict was capable of any act, no matter how fell and murderous.

"You have a grudge against me," Roy persisted. "Why? What have I done to you?"

The man glanced up slyly from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Why should I have a grudge against you?"

Roy's patience was nearly exhausted. He fought against a desire to shake the bundle of bones under his hand, shake it until he had forced the truth from it. With an effort he controlled himself and continued his questioning.

"That's what I'm asking you. Why have you tried to hurt or kill me?"

"You have no business on my island," retorted the man sullenly. The eyes beneath the shaggy brows glinted fiercely. "I never asked you to come here, snooping around and poking in your nose where you're not wanted. Why don't you keep off?"

Roy felt that he was getting somewhere at last. Resolutely keeping his voice to the same quiet tone, he continued:

"You call this island yours. Why?"

The man peered up at Roy querulously.

"Because it's mine, that's why."

"Who are you?" asked Roy, still trying to be conciliatory.

"Why do you want to know?" the wild man countered.

"Because anyone owning Cliff Island must be a person of importance," returned Roy, cleverly working on the madman's self-esteem. "I was wondering why I had not heard of you."

The ruse worked. The man inflated his narrow chest. His whole fantastic figure took on for a moment an absurdly pathetic dignity.

"I'm Benny Jones. I own this island and everything on it. No one has the right to set foot here without first asking me."

Roy was thinking rapidly. He was conscious of a growing elation. He felt that he was establishing a motive for the murder of John Brackenbone. If this

old madman really believed he owned the island, then what had there been to prevent him from making away with the realtor in the same way that he had tried to do away with him, Roy?

He dissembled his excitement with an effort. He knew that he must proceed slowly if he were to elicit anything like the truth from this madman.

"I don't think many people know that you own this island," Roy said slowly. "Take John Brackebone, for instance. I'm sure he thought that he was the owner."

A look of indescribable hatred flashed into the eyes of Benny Jones at the mention of John Brackebone's name.

CHAPTER XXII

A DASH FOR LIBERTY

"I'M on the right track," thought Roy Stover exultantly, as he watched the madman's face. "This fellow hates John Brackenbone like poison."

The old man shook his fist. He writhed in the young reporter's grip so that Roy had all he could do to maintain his hold of him. He mouthed and gibbered and seemed incoherent with rage. When at last he spoke, it was in wild denunciation of the realtor.

"I know him!" he cried. "I know him! He told me he owned the island. He told me, me, Benny Jones, who am master here! But I wasn't the one to go."

His voice fell to a whisper. The look of sly cunning grew in his eyes. He grinned and muttered to himself, rubbing his hands together as though in glee at a secret that he alone knew.

With luck, Roy thought, he would have a confession from this old rascal in a minute or two. But he must go easily, tread softly. Impossible to tell what new track a madman might take.

He said, carelessly:

"I suppose John Brackenbone was the one to go."

"Ah, yes," was the reply. "He went. He went. No room for both of us on this island, my island! Yes, yes. John Brackenbone went!"

From his pocket Roy produced the hunting knife with the stained blade.

"I suppose you killed him with this," he said pleasantly. "It was very clever of you. I congratulate you."

Watching the man's face with half-veiled eyes, Roy saw that he had overshot the mark.

"Who said I killed him?" cried Benny Jones. "Did I say I killed him? Did I? Did I?"

"Well, didn't you?" Roy asked easily.

"Murder! Murder! Murder!" shrieked the man. "He's trying to have me up for murder. He wants to see me in the electric chair. I know what he wants. But he can't have it, he can't have it, he can't have it!"

Roy interrupted the awful chant. He felt that he had about all his nerves could stand. He was abysmally disappointed by the crazy man's evasion of the trap he had set for him.

In a desperate attempt to wring victory from defeat, he abandoned his conciliatory attitude and said sternly:

"I know you killed him. No use trying to deny it. This blood-stained knife proves it."

"Aha, the knife, the knife!" shrieked the old scarecrow. "He thinks the knife is proof. What a fool! What a fool! I used the knife to skin a rabbit, I used

the knife to skin a rabbit, I used the knife——”

Roy ground his teeth together. He gave the skinny shoulder a vigorous shake.

“I give you one more chance!” he exclaimed. “Did you kill John Brackenbone?”

“Find out! Find out!” screamed the man.

He drew back a skinny claw and flung a handful of pebbles in Roy’s face.

The stinging impact of the pebbles startled Roy Stover and momentarily blinded him. He started back and released his hold upon the madman’s shoulder. He brushed a hand across his smarting eyes and looked about. The room was empty!

Roy Stover dashed into the hall.

That, too, was empty!

The man would not have had time to ascend the stairs. He must have made off by the front door. In two bounds Roy was down the hall and at the door. He pulled it open and darted out on the porch.

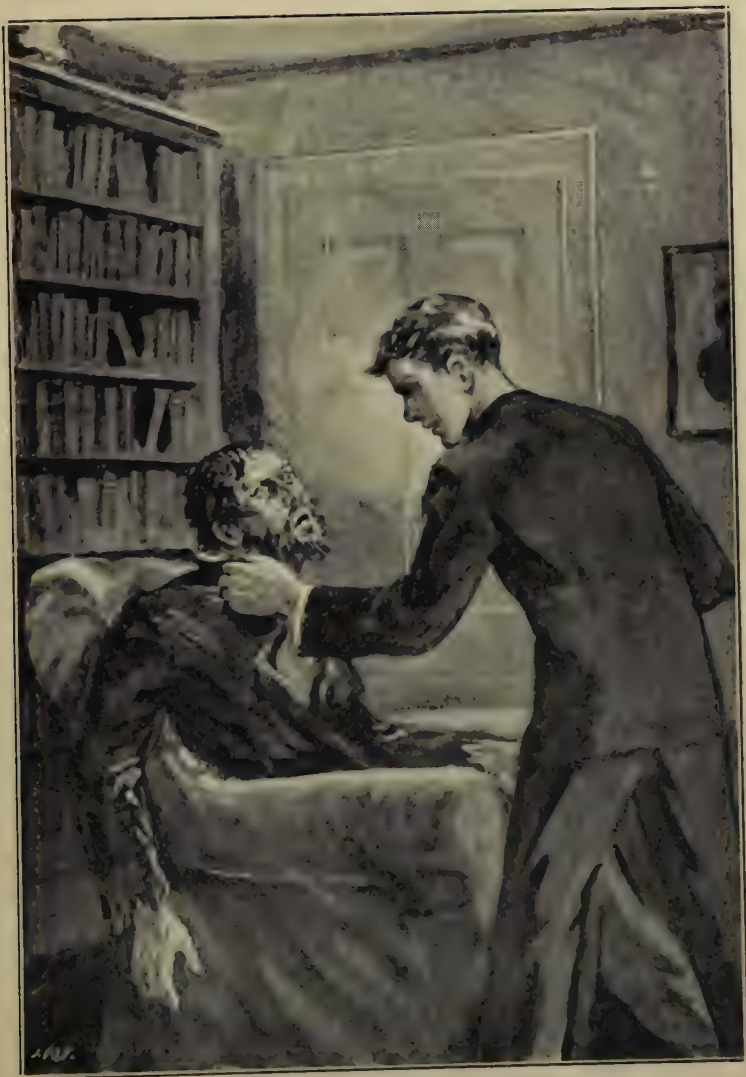
Not a sign anywhere of his erstwhile captive!

Saying uncomplimentary things about himself, the young reporter ran down the steps and searched the ground for footprints.

There they were, plainly marked in the wet earth, the fresh imprint of bony, bare feet.

Roy followed the prints as far as the woods and there lost them. The fugitive had forsaken the trail and plunged into the underbrush.

“No chance to find him now,” muttered Roy, in exasperation.



"Find out! Find out!" screamed the man.
(*The Cliff Island Mystery*)

(Page 190)



The rain was coming down heavily, but he turned up the collar of his coat and frantically continued a search that he had known from the first would be hopeless.

After an hour of fruitless hunting in the sodden woods, Roy Stover returned to the old stone house. He was weary, disgruntled, out of patience with himself and the world.

"I seemed to have the thing cinched and then had to let it slip through my fingers," he growled at himself. "I'm the world's worst detective."

However, when he sat down to review the day's events his mood lost something of its gloom. After all, he felt, he had made considerable progress. The blood-stained hunting knife was a valuable clue. He had succeeded in establishing a fairly strong motive for the murder in the distorted conviction of the crazy man that he owned the island and that every one who came there without his permission was an intruder to be dealt with as he thought best.

Roy Stover's own hectic experience had assured him that the old fellow was a dangerous maniac who would not hesitate to kill if it suited his convenience.

If John Brackenbone had asserted his ownership of the island in his lordly way and had ordered the ancient derelict away from what that derelict believed to be his own property, what more proper thing from the madman's point of view than to put an end to John Brackenbone?

Another thought occurred to Roy. There was the

popular belief, many times confirmed, that murderers revisited the scenes of their crimes. The madman had been wandering about the old stone house. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that Benny Jones was the murderer, what more likely conclusion than that the murder had been committed in the old mansion and the body hidden there, possibly in the cellar?

Having reached this point in his cogitations, Roy found himself once more ripe for action.

"I'll search this old house from attic to cellar!" he exclaimed. "If the body is hidden here, I'll find it. But I'm glad that the job's going to be done in the daylight."

He found a bolt on the inside of the front door and drove it home, against the possible unannounced return of Benny Jones. Remembering the murderous glint in the eyes of the maniac, Roy did not relish the possibility of being stalked from room to room by the man, perhaps of being waited for behind doors or around corners and of being finally laid out by the mate of the blood-stained knife he had in his pocket.

He took the precaution, also, to see that all the windows on the lower floor were fast or covered, locking as well the door at the head of the cellar stairs, before preparing to search the upper part of the building.

He went directly to the attic, where, as before, he found nothing but dust and junk. A thorough search of the second floor was no more successful. If Benny Jones had hidden the body of Brackenbone in that part

of the house, then it must be in a secret cupboard to which Roy could find no clue.

He went over the first floor carefully, but all seemed to him as it had been on his first visit to the place.

The lunch basket, with what remained in it of food, had been taken away by the police, along with the cigar remnant discovered in the place where John Brackenbone had, presumably, eaten his last meal on Cliff Island.

"The cellar still remains," ruminated Roy. "If I find nothing in that, I'll have to admit myself baffled."

What had remained of the afternoon sun had been completely obscured by the storm that still raged in the woods about the house.

The cellar was dark, but this time Roy had supplied himself with plenty of light. There was a new battery in his electric torch and a spare one in case of need. He had also provided himself with candles and a generous supply of matches. The one dark night spent in that mansion had taken away his appetite for more of the same kind.

Now he threw the light of his torch among the shadows. It illuminated only a small section, leaving the rest in gloom.

The place was not made more cheerful by the possibility that the body of a dead man might lie concealed behind its walls or beneath its floor. Roy found that his hands and forehead were bathed in sweat that was not wholly due to the warmth of the close cellar.

"It's a grisly business," he muttered, "and my little

chat with Benny Jones can't be called a good preparation for this sort of thing."

The rumble of the thunder came faintly. The chill of sodden ground permeated the cellar, filling it with a dampness that was like a clinging mist. Roy's lungs were full of the unwholesome air and he coughed uncomfortably.

"The last time I was here I was looking for the body of a suicide," he murmured. "Now I'm looking for the corpse of a murdered man. I wonder what grim secret may not be hidden behind these dank old walls."

His search revealed a group of rusted tools in one corner of the cellar. There was a coal shovel, a spade, a pickax and a hammer, together with old garden implements to which the loam still clung.

By the light of his torch Roy scanned the implements. Had they possibly been used as weapons?

But there was no such evidence as that hinted at by the blood stains on Benny Jones's hunting knife.

"Oh, well, Benny probably didn't need any of these things," Roy soliloquized. "The knife would have done the business."

He smiled at himself at the ease with which he slipped from one theory to another. He had come this time to Cliff Island almost convinced that John Brackbone was not dead but had disappeared deliberately for reasons only too apparent.

Now here he was, almost equally convinced that the real estate dealer had been murdered and that Benny

Jones was the murderer, all because of the stains on the knife and his few minutes of talk with the crazy man.

"Our eccentric friend says the hunting knife was used on a rabbit," muttered Roy. "Well, maybe he's right—but I'd like to know whether that rabbit had four legs or two."

Armed with the hammer, he began a tour of the cellar, tapping the walls at intervals and listening for the hollow sound that would warn him of a space back of the stones.

Twice he thought that he heard sounds on the floor above him and hastily extinguished the light, only to discover that the noise was the rumble of thunder dying away in the distance.

He went on with the tapping and at last was rewarded by a hollow sound that told of a space behind the wall.

Tremendously excited, the young reporter brought his light on the stones, searching for interstices into which he could pry with the point of the pickax. He found some and dug away with the implement at the mortar that held the stones together.

After ten minutes of the hardest kind of work, one of the stones came loose with unexpected suddenness.

The big stone struck the floor with a crash. Roy held his breath as the noise of its fall reverberated through the house.

As he approached the yawning hole in the masonry, Roy discovered that he was shaking with excitement.

"Steady!" he cautioned himself. "This luck looks

too good to hold. Still, I'm about due for a break. Who knows——"

Not without a shrinking of the flesh at the realization of what his fingers might touch, Roy thrust his hand into the hole.

Nothing!

The hole was not large enough to hold the body of a child, let alone that of a full-grown man.

"Wrong again!" Roy muttered savagely. "I don't wonder that Benny Jones gave me the merry ha-ha. As a detective, I'd make a good cellar digger."

He thrust his hand into the hole again, and this time his groping fingers encountered something.

It was a small object, soft and yielding, and when Roy drew it forth he discovered it to be an old notebook, frayed at the edges and with its cover half torn off.

He examined the notebook in the light of his torch.

There was nothing on the cover to indicate the owner; but inside were notes in a hand that was becoming familiar to Roy. It was the same as that on the two suicide notes.

"Now here's a pretty go," thought Roy, mystified. "I wish some kind person with brains would tell me what a notebook belonging to John Brackenbone is doing sealed up in a hole of the cellar wall. Some of the entries seem recent, but the notations look innocent enough—dry dates, appointments, figures. I wonder what it means?"

The more Roy Stover contemplated the book the more he was inclined to attach importance to it. John Brackenbone had not acquired Cliff Island and the old stone house until quite recently. That notebook could not have been there for more than three months at the most.

But why was it there at all? It did not seem of such importance as to warrant extreme care in the choice of a hiding place.

Was it not more likely that other and far more important papers had reposed in that hole in the wall and had been removed so hurriedly that the notebook had been overlooked?

Supposing this to be so, then the evidence of the notebook would seem to support the theory that Brackenbone had left the island hastily and of his own free will and had taken what he thought were all of his papers with him.

Still, if he contemplated suicide, he might have withdrawn them and destroyed them. He might have thought that at some time they would be discovered if the old house should be repaired or torn down. He might have shrunk, for his daughter's sake if not for his own, from the thought of proofs of guilt left for the cold scrutiny of the world.

A third supposition was possible. The murderer, Benny Jones or some other—assuming that Brackenbone was murdered—might have been aware of the existence of valuable papers, ransacked the cellar,

found them, and taken them out of their hiding place, overlooking the notebook inadvertently and sealing the hole up again.

John Brackenbone a suicide! John Brackenbone murdered! John Brackenbone a fugitive! The notebook fitted equally well each of the three theories.

"Gee, I'm up against it!" groaned Roy. "What a muddle!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER

"THE more I find, the less sure I am of anything," grumbled Roy Stover to himself. "If this keeps on I'll soon be as dippy as Benny Jones."

He completed his search of the cellar on the chance of finding another secret repository. But no hollow sound again rewarded the tapping of his hammer and he was thoroughly convinced that no body lay behind the walls or beneath the floor.

He was not sorry to abandon the dark, uncanny place. Even the dusty, lifeless rooms upstairs seemed almost bright and cheerful by contrast.

Feeling the necessity of fresh air, he went to the front door, unbolted it, and threw it open wide.

The storm was over. A fresh, sweet-scented breeze greeted the young reporter, and he stood there for a long time, drinking it in and going over in his mind the events of the last few hours.

His mind veered from theory to theory. At one moment he was convinced that the madman had committed the crime. The next, he was telling himself that Brackenbone had not been murdered at all, but had

succeeded in giving everybody the slip and was now in hiding until the excitement should blow over and he could make his escape in safety.

"The trouble is," he concluded, "that I haven't enough facts to work with. To-morrow I'm going to start out early and search this island from end to end, go over it with a fine-tooth comb. I've got to find clues that will point to one theory and no other."

Having filled his lungs with air, Roy retreated into the shadow-filled hall, closing and bolting the front door.

The prospect of spending another night in the eerie old house was not pleasant, but it was better, Roy thought, than sharing the woods with Benny Jones. Here at least were locks and bolts and some measure of security.

Roy Stover realized that he was very hungry. He hunted up the lunch hamper, which he had stowed in a corner of the library, and took it into the kitchen. Here he placed it upon the bare table and prepared to satisfy his appetite.

He had brought several fat candles, and these he lit and placed on the table, establishing them in little pools of their own drippings.

There were three shades at the windows, and these Roy pulled down. Then he produced a can of beans, some rolls, some radishes, a bottle of milk, and a generous chunk of his mother's chocolate cake.

He ate with relish and found himself taking a more cheerful view of the day's developments.

"At any rate," he comforted himself, "I'm doing as well as the police—probably better. They might be glad to get hold of this notebook of Brackenbone's, for instance."

Prompted by the thought, Roy took out the book and studied it long and thoughtfully by the light of the candles.

For a long time he could deduce nothing from it. That the notes were in Brackenbone's handwriting he felt sure. The figures and dates meant nothing to him. Ah! was that quite true?

With a tense quickening of interest, the young reporter bent above the last page of writing in the little book. Under the heading of a date just two days earlier than that on which he had disappeared, John Brackenbone had made this memorandum:

"Attend to steamship reservations."

Roy stared at that sentence for a long moment. Then he whistled softly.

"That doesn't look like planning suicide!" he exclaimed. "A man projecting a trip abroad is rarely in a suicidal frame of mind. No, sir! I'd be willing to bet my last dollar right now that that scoundrel is lying low somewhere, just waiting for his chance to skip across the big pond." He sprang excitedly from his chair and paced up and down the kitchen. "If Brackenbone is in hiding," he told himself, "I've got to find out where and be quick about it."

The young reporter went feverishly over all the old ground. Then, when his excitement had subsided somewhat, he sat down to reason things out more calmly.

"I mustn't go off at a tangent," he cautioned himself. "The theory of murder is still possible. Brackenbone may have planned to skip out, but all the same he might have been murdered before he could put his plan into effect. I mustn't let this new discovery run away with me. I've got to keep an open mind."

It was while trying to keep an open mind and going over and over every angle in the case that Roy, who had settled himself in a library chair, fell asleep.

How long he slept he did not know. But he woke with the certainty that there was someone in the room!

The candles had burned down and gone out. The room was in utter darkness. It was impossible to see his hand before his face. Yet Roy Stover knew that someone was there in the darkness close to him.

A horror such as the young reporter had never known before crept over him. He had a distinct impression that something had touched him, something cold and ghostly and subtly evil.

Confused and gruesome thoughts thronged his sleep-drugged brain. With an effort he fought them off, forced himself to think calmly and collectedly.

His hand gripped his automatic. It had a comforting feel. He drew it from his pocket, at the same time rising swiftly and noiselessly to his feet. As he did

so, he distinctly heard a rustle in the far corner of the room.

"Stand still or I'll fire!" he called sharply.

No answer. Someone or something was moving, just the same. Someone or something was slipping through the door into the hall!

Roy fumbled on the table for his flashlight. Fool that he was to have left it out of his hand for an instant! Double fool that he was to have fallen asleep at all!

He felt the torch, turned it on and flooded the corner near the door with light.

No one was there!

Fully alive now to the danger that threatened him in this house of shadows and mystery, the young reporter rushed after his unknown visitor through the open library door into the hall.

The hall was empty. Roy turned the flashlight up the staircase, but could see no one.

As he neared the open door of the living room a cool breeze blew across him.

A window was broken and the curtains were fluttering.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DOWNRUSHING ROCK

FEELING sure that his unknown visitor had escaped, Roy Stover ran into the room.

Almost an entire pane of a window in this room had been broken and the shattered pieces removed to an extent that permitted free ingress and egress. This had been done while he slept, and he wondered that the breaking of the glass had failed to arouse him. This was in another room from that in which Roy had broken a window some time before—a window later covered with a shade.

The window had been intact when he had made his round of the rooms. It had been nailed down. No doubt the intruder had come through that broken space and had departed in the same way.

Roy knew that the man, whoever he was, had not had time to get up the stairs. A search of the lower floor would suffice.

He looked through every room. As he expected, there was no one to be found. No enemy lurked in the shadows or crouched behind doors. Except for that sound of a human presence in the library and the

evidence of the broken window, Roy Stover might have managed to convince himself that he had dreamed the hair-raising incident.

There was no more sleep for the young reporter that night. He got out other candles, lit them, and sat down, prepared to keep a lonely vigil till morning.

The house was full of noises. Much of it was the creaking inseparable from an old structure. Once Roy was sure that he heard steps overhead and once he felt certain that stealthy feet were descending the stairs. Yet when he jumped to his feet, pistol in hand, the sounds stopped and were not repeated.

Never had a night seemed so long and never had Roy Stover more warmly welcomed the dawn when it began to creep in through the windows.

Action was a delight after the hours of enforced idleness. He ate breakfast from the store in the hamper and then set to work ridding the kitchen of signs of his occupancy.

He was determined not to spend another night in the house if by any possibility it could be avoided. He knew that his life was in grave danger and that he would do well to conclude his business and leave the island while he could.

He had decided during that long night vigil that in the morning he would make a thorough search of the rocks where the coat and hat and suicide note had been found. He hoped that, either among the rocks or on the sands below, he might find some clue that had been overlooked by the police. Failing this, he

would beat the woods once more and then make for the mainland.

He was about to leave the house when he discovered the loss of one of his chief reliances for showing that murder had been done.

The hunting knife with its blood-stained blade was gone!

The discovery struck Roy Stover with the force of a blow. Vividly he recalled that sense of an evil, creeping presence in the library; that distinct impression of his that shadowy, mysterious hands had touched him.

"So it was Benny Jones!" he exclaimed. "The madman came to get his knife!"

The realization that his midnight visitor had been armed with a deadly weapon turned Roy Stover's blood cold. He felt that in that few seconds before he had roused to the sense of an alien presence in the room he had been nearer to death than he ever wanted to be again.

Why had Benny Jones hesitated to plunge the hunting knife into Roy's heart?

"Perhaps," Roy answered his own question, "I woke up too suddenly. He knew that I had a pistol and may have been afraid of getting a bullet. At any rate, something tells me that I had a close shave last night."

He left the house in a sobered mood. The loss of the knife irritated him. He wanted to have those blood stains analyzed. If the blood proved to be hu-

man, it would be a bit of evidence hard to explain away. Joined with the real estate dealer's disappearance, it would be an almost irresistible conclusion that the blood was that of John Brackenbone.

Still, the murder theory did not seem so plausible to the young reporter's mind since the discovery of the notebook with its significant reference to "steamer reservations." That pointed strongly toward an intended flight. Roy wished that the name of the steamer had been given. That would have helped at any rate to indicate whether Brackenbone was planning to go to Europe, to South America, or to some more distant quarter of the globe.

Pondering these thoughts, Roy Stover reached the cliffs.

The day was sunny and fine and he could see for a long distance in every direction. One or two fishing boats were already out on the lake. It was a normal, peaceful sight and Roy's spirits lifted.

He clambered down the cliff to the place where the coat had lain and made an exhaustive hunt in the vicinity for anything that might aid his present purpose. He investigated every crevice, but found nothing of what he sought.

Then he made his way to the sands below. The strip of beach was a narrow one and studded here and there with large rocks.

Roy had gone only a little way along the sands when he gave a sudden exclamation and dropped to the beach.

At his feet, half buried in sand, was a worn black pocketbook!

Roy picked it up eagerly and examined it. There was nothing on it or in it to indicate to whom it belonged. Nor were there any contents. It was absolutely empty.

"A dud!" exclaimed Roy disgustedly. "Just one thing more to kid me along."

A noise above caught his attention. He looked up.

A great rock was bounding down the cliff, rushing directly toward him with a thunderous roar, and peering over the top of the cliff was the fiendish, grinning face of Benny Jones!

CHAPTER XXV

CLOSE TO DEATH

IN THAT awful instant of horror, Roy Stover thought that his last hour had come. Doom was rushing down upon him, swift, relentless, terrible.

Had he been on the open beach, he might have leaped aside. But at the moment he was standing between two large rocks close to the water's edge.

He had no time to climb them. Nor had he time to leap back on the open beach and then dart to one side.

Swift as lightning, he made one wild bound into the lake!

Not an instant too soon! The next moment the great rock struck the spot where the young reporter had been standing and buried itself in the wet sand.

The lake was deep at the point where Roy had plunged, and his dive carried him far down into the green water. He rose to the surface and shook the water from his eyes. He saw the rock, still quivering as it settled more deeply into the sand. Only his instant action had saved him from a horrible death!

Roy Stover's heart was beating like a trip hammer. His brain was seething. Two emotions were upper-

most, thankfulness for his escape, rage at the fiend whose plot had so nearly succeeded.

The young reporter swam to land and wrung the water as well as he could from his clothes. His first impulse was to climb the cliff and hunt the miscreant down. But a moment's reflection convinced him of the folly of this. He would be in full view while climbing and another rock following the first might crush out his life.

The infernal cunning as well as the atrocity of the act added fuel to his rage. Had his mangled body been found beneath the rock, no blame would have been attached to any one. It would have been attributed to accident, a dislodged rock, loosened perhaps by the storm, rolling down the cliff and catching him unawares.

"He may be crazy," muttered Roy, "but he isn't so crazy as not to be afraid of punishment. This method was safer than knifing."

Roy hastened along the beach until he came to a point where the cliff top lowered until it almost reached the water level. There he turned and plunged into the woods.

First, however, he dried his pistol and inserted fresh cartridges. He knew the deadliness of the foe with whom he had to deal. From now on, he was going to be on the alert every moment.

All that day he tramped through the woods with two purposes in mind. One was to find any further evidence that would fit any of the three possible theo-

ries he had framed in his mind. The other was to find Benny Jones.

This last was not for purposes of revenge. His first hot rage had subsided. After all, the man was crazy and not responsible for his acts. But he was a menace, nevertheless, as deadly as the rattlesnakes on the island. More so, in fact. For the rattlesnake would strike only when in danger or alarmed. The crazy man, on the contrary, sought out his prey. It was of the first importance that he be captured and put in an insane asylum.

How he was to effect this, Roy Stover did not know. There was a chance that he might find him asleep after his nocturnal prowlings. Or he might come upon him unawares. Or he might come to grips with him and overcome him by sheer power of muscle. He would not shoot unless it were absolutely necessary to save his own life. Even then he would shoot to disable but not to kill.

Several times that day in crossing and recrossing the island the young reporter found himself in the vicinity of the maniac's shack. Each time he stole close and looked in through the window. But there was no sign of the man he was seeking.

His search for other evidence connected with Brackenbone's disappearance was equally fruitless. Nowhere was there any sign of the ground having been freshly disturbed, thus indicating the presence of a grave.

The approach of night drove him back to the old

house. He dreaded the necessity of this, but there was no alternative. To stay out in the open would be to invite disaster, to play right into the hands of his enemy. In the house, at least, he could lock and bolt himself in.

He was dog tired, mentally and physically. He had had but little sleep the night before and even that little had almost cost him his life. He could have no sleep at all during the coming night. How long could he keep that up?

No longer than to-morrow, he decided. He would meet Elmer in the morning and ask him to call again toward night. He would spend one more day on Cliff Island. Then, if nothing more materialized, he would go back at night to Lakeport and get some of the sleep of which he had been cheated. Cliff Island would not shift its position and he could always come back if occasion warranted.

All that night he kept his lonely vigil. He had boarded up the broken window. Every few minutes he made the rounds of the rooms, not only to assure himself of security but to help keep him awake. His eyelids were heavy. Everything in him clamored for sleep. But he did not yield.

The next morning he was early at the inlet where Elmer had promised to meet him. His friend was not yet there, but in a few minutes Roy saw his motor-boat coming up the lake.

"Gee, old man, what's happened to you?" was El-

mer's first greeting, as the boat gently poked its nose into the sand.

"Do I look as though anything had happened to me?" asked Roy.

"I should say you did," was the somewhat alarmed reply. "Your eyes are bloodshot, your face is haggard and you've lost a lot of weight. Take your hat off and let me see if your hair is white."

"Not quite as bad as that," laughed Roy, "but I've lost a lot of sleep and had a pretty exciting time."

"How?" asked Elmer.

"Oh, in various ways," evaded Roy.

"Still as talkative as a clam."

"Anything developed in Lakeport?"

"The old town is still there."

Roy laughed.

"Trying to give me some of my own medicine, are you?" he said.

"Just a taste," laughed Elmer. "But, after all, I'm more generous than you. Shoot. What do you want to know?"

"Have the police found Brackenbone's body?" Roy queried.

"No."

"What are they doing that you know of?"

"Looking wise for the most part and asking foolish questions."

"Still pestering your father?" asked Roy carelessly.

"Yes, and other folks, too," answered Elmer mo-

rosely. "Victor Lawrence, for instance. Dad's getting fed up with it. Asked Dexter right out yesterday what was the big idea."

"What did Dexter say?"

"Oh, gave dad a lot of hot air that evaded the question. He's as hard to pin down to anything as you are, and that's going some. But jump in and we'll beat it back to Lakeport."

"Not just now," replied Roy. "I——"

"You're going right now, if I have to throw you into the boat," declared Elmer. "There's something about this island that's doing things to you. Come along."

"No," said Roy, "I'm not quite ready. But if you'll come back this afternoon I'll go with you. Honor bright!"

Elmer grumbled, but had to be content with the compromise and reluctantly departed.

In the few hours remaining Roy gave every part of the island one more intensive search, but ran across no other clue, looked in vain for the *Challenge*, and saw no trace of Benny Jones.

"That fellow could give points to the ghost of the dead hunter on keeping out of sight," muttered Roy to himself, as he went down to meet Elmer. "Well, I've done my best, but the results have been nothing to write home about."

Elmer was on hand at the appointed time and the motorboat made quick time to Lakeport.

Mr. Stover was shocked at his son's appearance when the latter came into his office.

"Are you sick, Roy? Are you hurt?" he asked, with keen anxiety.

"No," replied Roy. "I'm all right, Dad. But I could go to sleep standing on my feet."

Into his father's eager ears he poured the story of his adventures.

Mr. Stover's face blanched as he learned how near Roy had been to death at the hands of the maniac.

"It's atrocious!" he cried. "The man's a menace. I'll have Dexter send a squad of his men over and beat the woods from end to end."

"They'll be good if they find him," replied Roy. "He's as slippery as an eel. Well, now that you've heard my story, Dad, what do you think of it? What's your slant on the Brackenbone case? Is it suicide? Is it murder? Is it flight? Make your choice."

CHAPTER XXVI

A NEW HINT

MR. STOVER leaned back in his chair and pondered long and deeply before answering his son's question.

"To tell the truth, I'm up a tree," he confessed at last. "I don't remember a time when I've been more perplexed. There are times when, like a weather-vane, my mind veers to all points of the compass. The minute I fix on one theory something comes along and upsets it."

"Same here," admitted Roy.

"That notebook you found certainly points to the probability that Brackenbone was making preparations for flight," went on Mr. Stover. "That reference to steamer reservations is significant. Still, it may be capable of an innocent interpretation. Perhaps his daughter, Amanda, was going to take a trip abroad by herself. She's old enough to travel alone."

"And determined enough," put in Roy, remembering the only occasion on which he had met the lady in question. "I'd back her against a man-eating shark."

Mr. Stover smiled.

"She might win," he said. "The fact that she is

reported to have gone to New York lends color to the idea that she might have been preparing to sail from there. It doesn't follow that Brackenbone was going with her. Or some acquaintance of his might have asked him to arrange for steamer reservations. No, Son, the reference is indicative, but by no means conclusive."

"I suppose not," admitted Roy.

"And, of course, if the body is found, that knocks the theory of flight out altogether," pursued his father. "In that event, there would be left only the alternative of murder or suicide. I'm about equally divided between the two. But I'm inclined to think that your experiences on the island this last time strengthen the murder theory. The ferocity of Benny Jones is frightful. Killing means nothing to him. And if he tried to kill you, who were just a transient visitor to the place, how much more fierce would be his anger against Brackenbone who had actually bought the island and who had probably told him so in his own brutal way and perhaps ordered him to get off or told him he'd be taken off. You say that the mere mention of Brackenbone's name sent the man into a paroxysm of fury. Take it altogether, Roy, I think Benny Jones killed John Brackenbone. But to-morrow," he added, with a whimsical smile, "I may think something entirely different. The thing has got me guessing."

"How about suspects other than the wild man?" asked Roy. "Elmer was telling me that the police

were questioning his father and Victor Lawrence."

Mr. Stover's brow clouded.

"They are," he said. "And the town is buzzing with speculation."

"How is opinion running?"

"It's divided," admitted Mr. Stover reluctantly. "Of course, everybody knows that Raymond and Lawrence are good citizens. But good citizens have sometimes killed in moments of ungovernable anger. Both had been wronged by Brackenbone. Both have uttered threats—threats that probably didn't really mean anything, but now come back to plague them. And Lawrence had violently assaulted him. That makes it worse for him than for Raymond. If the body is found and found to have wounds upon it that caused death, I'm afraid that Lawrence may be arrested on suspicion."

"Poor Maiziel" exclaimed Roy. "By the way, I didn't see her in the outer office. Where is she?"

"I sent her home this morning to rest for a few days," replied his father. "The poor girl is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She's afraid her father will go crazy. It's a sad, sad household."

"Well, you go on home now," directed Mr. Stover. "Your mother's distracted with fears for you. Get your supper, tumble into bed, and sleep the clock around. I'll write up your story from what you've told me."

Roy hesitated.

"Would you very much mind, Dad, holding the story for a while?" he asked.

His father looked at him in surprise. This was against all his instincts as a newspaper man.

"But it's fresh now, hot from the griddle, and it will make a rattling good story," he objected. "The wild man's attempt to kill you, the smashed window, the underground tunnel, the secret cache in the cellar, the blood-stained knife—why, it will stir up everybody in Lakeport! No, Son, it's got to go in."

"Please, Dad," begged Roy.

"But why?" demanded his father somewhat impatiently.

"Because of a hunch I have," replied Roy, a little lamely. "It's something that occurred to me on my way down the lake. I just want a chance to see if there's anything in it. Give me one more day before you put anything in print. Please!"

Mr. Stover pondered. He did not despise these vague feelings. He had seen surprising results come from them. And Roy's impressions usually had something behind them.

"Got an ace up your sleeve, Roy?"

"It may be only a deuce," admitted Roy. "But ace or deuce, it's there."

Mr. Stover yielded, though reluctantly.

"I'm going against my judgment, but I'll do it," he promised. "Gardner'll throw a fit. Do you care to tell me what your hunch is?"

"Please don't ask me, Dad!" begged Roy. "Let me see for myself what there is in it."

"All right. Run along now and catch up on sleep."

Exclamations from his mother and Nell punctuated Roy's recital at home of his experiences on the island, although he omitted or glossed over the more harrowing features.

"This dreadful newspaper business!" exclaimed Mrs. Stover. "It takes you into all kinds of terrible places. Sometimes I wish you were in anything else."

"But think of all the fun I'd be missing," laughed Roy, as he gave her a kiss.

"You won't be called to-morrow," said his mother, as, after a refreshing shower and a bountiful meal, Roy started upstairs for bed. "Sleep all day if you want to, you poor boy."

"Thanks, Mother. But I'd like to be called at six in the morning," replied Roy. "I'm doing the early-bird stunt to-morrow."

"If I only catch the worm!" he added to himself.

His mother protested, but finally yielded.

That bed! Those cool, smooth sheets! The quiet and security! No face at the window! No ghostly rustling! No padding footsteps on the stairs! Home!

Yet, despite the allurements of that bed, the young reporter was out of it bright and early, had a hasty breakfast, and jumped into his car. He turned its nose in the direction of the deserted Brackenbone mansion, eight miles away.

The old colored man had given him the Cliff Island

clue. Inadvertently it is true, but still he had given it. Was there a possibility that he could follow up that first clue with a second?

The chances were that he could not. But a "hunch" takes no account of chances!

The Brackenbone place was still deserted. Roy searched the grounds in vain for the old Negro.

He inquired of some of the neighbors and finally found out where the old fellow lived. He followed the directions to a ramshackle hut on the outskirts of the town. There he found the object of his search, tranquilly smoking his pipe on the doorstep while his wife within was clearing away the breakfast dishes. The old man recognized his visitor and rose rather shakily to greet him.

"Howdy, sah?" he said.

"Sit right down, Uncle," said Roy, taking a seat on the steps, an example that the other rather hesitatingly followed. "Nice little garden patch you have here."

"Tol'able, sah, tol'able," the old man assented. "Got mo' time to tend to it, now dat Ah ain't wukkin' fur Mistah Brackenbone."

"Oh, hasn't he come back yet?" asked Roy carelessly.

"No, sah," was the reply. "S'pose he's over at Cliff Islan'. Dat man sho' does have a likin' fur islan's."

"For islands?" queried Roy, trying to quell a rising excitement. "Well, they are nice places. Plenty of water around them, fishing, boating, swimming. But

I should think one island would be enough for any man. He can't live on more than one of them at a time. Still, I suppose a man likes a change once in a while. Mr. Brackenbone is rich enough to buy several islands if he wants to."

"Yes, suh, Ah s'pose so," assented the old fellow. "Now dere's dat one he used to go to in Mirror Lake. Awful out-o'-de-way place. Don't see no one round dere in a month o' Sundays. Mistah Brackenbone liked it dough, an'——"

"Mirror Lake, you said?" remarked Roy indifferently, picking a bit of lint off his trousers.

"Yes, suh, Mirror Lake—has you got to be goin', sah?" as Roy rose hastily to his feet.

"Yes," replied Roy. "Just thought of something I've got to attend to. Good-by, Uncle. Get some tobacco with this," and he thrust a bill into the old man's hand.

A moment later he jumped into the car and was soon "burning up" the road.

CHAPTER XXVII

GETTING CLOSER

MIRROR LAKE!

Roy Stover had heard of the place, though he had never been there. He knew that it was a small body of water about twenty miles from Eagle Lake, but not nearly as large as the latter. It was in a wild and desolate section and difficult of access. The roads were few and rough and motorists avoided them.

There was plenty of game in the region, and hunting parties sometimes visited it. But it was the closed season just now, and no hunters were likely to be in the vicinity. Altogether it was an ideal hiding place for one who wanted to keep out of the public view. As the old colored man had said, a visitor might not appear there in "a month of Sundays."

And John Brackenbone had an island there—at least, he had had one years ago, if the colored man were to be believed. Doubtless he knew every foot of that uninhabited section. What better place in which to lie low until the hue and cry had died away?

It was a slender clue. Yet it was a clue, and Roy grasped it. Of course, John Brackenbone if he still

lived, could just as easily be in any one of a thousand other places. But this was at least something to work on.

The young reporter went directly to his father's room on reaching the *Eagle* building.

"Well, Roy, did the early bird catch the worm?" asked his father, looking up and smiling.

"Not yet," admitted Roy. "But the bird is still on the job. Tell me this, Dad. Is there a warrant out for Brackenbone?"

"I don't know of any," replied Mr. Stover. "Wait a minute and I'll call up Dexter."

He phoned the police station and had a brief conference with the lieutenant.

"No," he said, as he hung up. "No doubt there would have been by this time if it were not for the universal or almost universal impression that the man is a suicide or a victim of a murderer. No use swearing out a warrant against a dead man. But by his own confession in that note of his he's a defaulter, and Dexter says that if any of his men came across him they'd nab and hold him until a warrant could be issued."

"I see," said Roy. "Any citizen can make an arrest, can't he, Dad?"

"I believe he can if he has muscle enough and nerve enough and has reasonable grounds for doing so. But if it were afterward shown that the arrest was unjustified he'd probably find himself in hot water. It's

a risky thing to do. Dexter was very curious. Asked if you'd found out anything."

"Let him worry," replied Roy. "It'll be good for him. I'm off, Dad. Please don't ask me where. But keep the presses open till the very last minute, won't you?"

"I surely will," promised his father. "More power to you, my boy! But be mighty careful."

"I will," said Roy, as he left the room.

He stopped for an instant at Maizie's desk.

"Look here, young lady," he said. "What are you doing here? I thought my father told you to stay at home and rest."

"He did," replied Maizie. "But if I couldn't take up my mind with work I'd go crazy. Oh, Roy, it's awful at home!"

"I have a hunch you'll be singing like a lark tomorrow," said Roy.

Maizie looked up quickly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, her eyes shining.

"Just that," replied Roy. "It's only a hunch, h-u-n-c-h, but—well, wait and see."

"Oh, Roy, if you succeed, I'll—I'll—" She stopped.

"Well, what'll you do?" challenged Roy.

"I'll—I'll thank you," said Maizie lamely, blushing like a peony.

Roy laughed, ran down the stairs and jumped into his car.

He drove furiously to the Raymond dock.

"Elmer," he said, as his friend came forward to meet him, "what do you know about Mirror Lake?"

"Plenty," replied Elmer. "I've taken parties up there sometimes in the hunting season."

"Taken them? How? In a car?" asked Roy.

"No, in a boat," was the reply.

"How can you get from here to there in a boat?" asked Roy, who was rather vague as to the geography of that region.

"There's a little river that connects Eagle Lake and Mirror Lake," explained Elmer. "It's full of rocks and sandbars and risky to navigate at low water, but I've done it sometimes when the river was high."

"A river!" exclaimed Roy exultantly. "Then it's possible for one to go from Cliff Island to Mirror Lake by boat?"

"Sure thing," replied Elmer. "But he'd be taking a risk of wrecking his boat if the water were low. Still, he might make it."

"Glory hallelujah!" cried Roy jubilantly.

"What's all the shooting about?" asked Elmer.

"My hunch is working!" cried Roy, hardly able to contain himself. "Elmer, you know that country up there. You've often said that you wished I'd let you in on some of my work. I'm going to call your bluff."

"Call it," challenged Elmer.

"I want you to go with me to Mirror Lake," went on Roy rapidly. "You say you've taken hunting parties up there. You and I will be a hunting party."

But we're not going after four-legged game. We're going to hunt John Brackenbone!"

"What?" cried Elmer, flaring up into instant excitement.

"Just that," affirmed Roy. "But mum's the word. Listen, Elmer. I've just learned that Brackenbone used to own a little island up there. You've just told me that it's possible to go from Cliff Island to Mirror Lake. Brackenbone went from Lakeport to Cliff Island in his motorboat, the *Challenge*. That boat has never been found. It hasn't been adrift on Eagle Lake nor was it tied up at Cliff Island. I searched every foot of the shore when I was there. Why hasn't it been found? Because John Brackenbone went in it through that little river that leads to Mirror Lake!"

"By Jove, I believe you've hit it!" exclaimed Elmer, his excitement growing. "Gee, Roy, am I with you? I'd like to see you try to shunt me off."

"It'll be dangerous work," warned Roy. "Brackenbone is a big, powerful man and a desperate one. He'll undoubtedly be armed. Have you a gun?"

"No, but dad has one," replied Elmer. "I know where he keeps it. I'll get it. It's a big-calibre revolver."

"Bully! Go and get it then and we'll be off. How shall we go, by boat or car?"

"By car," replied Elmer. "The water in the river is too low just now to risk the boat. We'll find the roads poor up that way, but I know how to get there."

"But the place is on an island," objected Roy. "How can we cross over without a boat?"

"That's all right," replied Elmer to Roy's objection. "I think I know the place you mean. It's the only one of the kind in the lake. It isn't really an island, though it's usually referred to that way. There's a narrow strip that connects it with the mainland, and we can cross by that. The car's better than the boat, anyway, for we can park it at a distance and go over on foot. The chug-chug of the boat would give a warning."

"Right you are," assented Roy, relieved. "Hurry along then and we'll be going. At any hour that old scoundrel may decide to quit the island. That is, if he's ever been there," he put in as a saving clause.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DRAWING THE NET

"BY THE way, Elmer," Roy Stover said, as his friend hurried off, "knock a little lunch together, will you? I forgot to bring any and the chances are we'll need it."

Elmer Raymond promised and hurried off. He was back in a surprisingly short time with the food and the revolver.

"There it is," he said, as he exhibited the weapon to Roy.

"Good!" returned the young reporter. "I have my automatic pistol along. I hope we shan't have to use either of them, and we won't fire except in the last extremity. I'm sure that Brackenbone will put up a fight if cornered, but we'll depend on quickness and muscle rather than guns."

"You're the boss," declared Elmer. "I'm just a buck private, and what you say goes."

"It's not only Brackenbone I'm after," remarked Roy, as they bowled rapidly along.

"Who else?" asked Elmer, in surprise.

"Not 'who' else, but 'what' else," corrected Roy.

"I'm after the money that he stole from your father and Mr. Lawrence and a host of other people."

"Gee, that would be great!" exclaimed Elmer. "Do you suppose that Brackenbone has it with him?"

"I think very likely," returned Roy. "I know that he's turned every bit of property into cash, either by selling it or raising as much as he could in mortgages. In addition, he has the money that he got under false pretences from your father and others. It isn't likely that he's banked that, for, if he had, it might be discovered and seized by his creditors. No, depend upon it, he has it with him in actual cash, ready to take it along with him when he sees a good chance to skip to foreign parts. I've figured that he must have a hundred thousand or thereabouts."

"By Jove, what a haul that would be if we could nab it together with the man himself! A hundred thousand dollars is a heap of money."

"You said something," agreed Roy. "So big a heap that he'll put up a desperate fight to hold on to it."

For the first fifteen miles of the journey Roy Stover held the wheel. Then, as the region gradually became less familiar to him, he surrendered it to Elmer.

They were entering a wild part of the country, stony, rough, and almost uncultivated. Farms became fewer as they went on and at last surrendered altogether to the woodland.

The roads were rough and rutted and the car bumped and bounced over them until it seemed that it must break its springs. At times they had to ford

small streams where the water almost came up to the floor of the roadster.

"Some road to travel, I'll tell the world!" exclaimed Elmer, as a sudden bounce of the car sent him almost out on his head.

"No road at all," grinned Roy. "It isn't even a decent trail. Puts me in mind of the highways Daniel Boone used to travel," he added.

"Certainly does look like the primeval forests of pioneer days. Gosh, I hope we don't break down here and have to walk back!"

A better hiding place for a fugitive from justice—if the rascal was really alive—could scarcely be imagined. The chances of discovery, if one kept on his guard, would be almost negligible.

For part of the way the road ran along parallel to the little rocky river that connected Eagle Lake and Mirror Lake and at a distance of from two hundred to three hundred feet.

At one point Roy uttered an exclamation and put his hand on Elmer's arm.

"What's that thing on the rocks over there?" he asked, pointing to something of which he could see only an irregular outline.

Elmer Raymond stopped the car and looked in the direction indicated.

"It looks like a boat to me!" he exclaimed. "Pretty well bunged up, too."

"Let's go over and take a look at it," suggested the young reporter, jumping from the car.

Elmer followed his example and the two made their way through the tangled underbrush to the shores of the little brawling, tumbling river.

"It's a motorboat!" cried the young reporter in great excitement. "Wrecked on the rocks! See that big hole in the hull? Elmer, old boy, we're on the right track. Dollars to doughnuts that's John Brackbone's boat, the *Challenge*! He tried to get through here, but the rocks got him."

"I'll bet you're right," agreed Elmer, after a moments inspection. "Looks like her lines. But we'll soon find out."

The boat lay among some rocks about fifty feet from shore. The water was very low and it seemed possible to reach the vessel by jumping from rock to rock without taking much chance of a ducking.

This they accomplished with a slip or two into the water that wet their trousers to the knees but did no further damage.

As Roy Stover neared the craft, he looked for the lettering on the stern. It was not visible, but as he got closer he could see that the name had been almost obliterated by scraping with some sharp implement.

"Look, Elmer," he cried. "He's tried to scrape off the name! Let's see how good a job he's made of it."

They bent over and studied the defaced letters. Some of them were entirely gone, but with others the haste with which the work had been done had left outlines that could be faintly discerned.

"I can make out an 'H' and an 'L' and a 'G'!" ex-

claimed Roy excitedly. "And they're just far enough apart to fit into the name I'm looking for. It's the *Challenge*, or I'll eat my hat."

"That's what it is, beyond a doubt," agreed Elmer. "Now that we're closer, I'd have recognized the boat anyway. It's Brackenbone's boat, all right. He got out of the channel by mistake and slewed her over here on the rocks. Let's get on board and see if we can find anything."

They clambered over the side. The boat was full of water and would have sunk long since had not the rocks on which it was impaled held it up.

A short search revealed nothing of importance and the friends made their way again to shore.

"Now we know we're on the trail," exulted the young reporter, as they seated themselves in the car and Elmer threw in the clutch. "Up to now it's been largely guesswork."

"Mighty clever guesswork, if you ask me," put in Elmer.

"Thanks for them kind words," chuckled Roy. "But it was guesswork, just the same. But here's positive proof that Brackenbone didn't commit suicide, that he wasn't murdered, and that he tried to bring that boat through the river to Mirror Lake. Gee, what a beat's in store for the *Eagle* if we can only find him there!"

"Well, we'll know mighty soon whether he's there or not," replied Elmer. "We're getting near Mirror Lake now, and that island, or near island, that we're

figuring on is only about three miles from this end of the lake. Even with these rotten roads, we ought to be there within the next twenty minutes.

"Good!" exclaimed Roy Stover, his heart beating high. "Stop about a mile this side of it, Elmer, and we'll park the car somewhere. I don't want Brackebone to hear it coming. We'll go the rest of the way on foot."

A few minutes later Elmer Raymond stopped the car.

CHAPTER XXIX

A TERRIFIC BATTLE

"HERE we are," announced Elmer Raymond. "The place is about a mile ahead."

"All right," replied the young reporter. "Let's draw the car to the side of the road under that clump of trees. No danger of it's being stolen in this out of the way place."

The two jumped out, stowed the car, and proceeded on foot.

They took no special precautions for the moment. If they chanced to meet Brackenbone on the road, so much the better. It would simplify their problems.

But as they drew nearer to the narrow strip of land that led over to the so-called island, they proceeded cautiously, availing themselves of every bit of cover. The ground was soft after the recent rains and deadened their footsteps. The road, scarcely more than a narrow trail, was bordered thickly with bushes. Great overarching trees on both sides kept the road in shadow.

"Just what's your plan, Roy?" whispered Elmer, as they reached the strip of land about fifty feet wide,

on either side of which the waters of the lake were lapping.

"Caution first and quick action when the time comes," replied Roy Stover. "I'm counting chiefly on surprise. If he sees us first, the game may be up. He could barricade himself in and shoot from the windows. I've no doubt he'd try to kill both of us rather than be captured. If he were nabbed for it afterward, he could plead that he thought we were burglars. We're not officers of the law, you know, and he might get away with it. So I want to catch him napping and get the drop on him. We may have to wait till night to do it."

"Suppose, even with the drop on him, he refuses to surrender?" suggested Elmer.

"We'll have to be guided by circumstances," replied Roy. "We won't shoot unless our lives are threatened. Even then, aim at his legs. It will be enough to disable him. But one thing is certain. If John Brackenbone is here, we're not going back to Lakeport without him!"

As stealthily as Indians, Roy Stover and his chum stole along until they caught sight of a small hunting lodge in a little clearing at some distance away. It was a solidly built structure of the bungalow type, containing apparently about four rooms, all on one floor.

"That must be the place," whispered Elmer. "It's the only thing of the kind on the island, as I remember."

They crouched among some thick bushes on the fringe of the clearing and surveyed the building intently.

It had entrances front and back, with solid oaken doors. Indeed, solidity seemed to be the keynote of the place, from the heavy logs of which it was built to the massive brick chimney at the side. It would be a hard place to storm.

No shred of smoke was coming from the chimney nor was there any other trace of human occupancy. To all appearance, the place might have been deserted for years.

"Doesn't look as though his nibs were here at all," murmured Elmer.

"No," admitted Roy. "Then again he may be inside there at this moment, scanning the woods through some loophole in the logs with a telescope. It isn't to be expected that we'd find him taking a sun bath on the porch."

"We might take a chance and take a squint through one of the windows," suggested Elmer.

"And give the whole show away, perhaps?" answered Roy. "Not on your life! Not by daylight, anyway. We've just got to settle down for a long wait, old man. From where we are now we can command a view of both doors. He can't go out or come in without our knowing it. Maybe he's off somewhere on a prowl."

The young reporter looked at his watch.

"Only a little after twelve," he announced. "We

may have to wait here six or seven hours. But I have a feeling that we'll be paid for waiting. Did you bring that grub along?"

"Stuffed it into my pocket when we got out of the car."

"Shell it out," said Roy. "I'm as hungry as a wolf."

They ate heartily, and then made themselves as comfortable as they could and settled down for a long vigil.

The hours dragged away with intolerable slowness until, just as dusk was falling, Roy straightened up and touched Elmer's arm.

"He's coming!" he whispered tensely. "Look, over there to the right."

A shadowy figure was taking shape in the woods on the further side.

A moment later the form of a very old man with long white hair and beard, walking slowly as though bent with the weight of years and moving with a limp, emerged from the woods, produced a key, and entered the front door of the lodge.

Roy Stover's heart sank. So this was the way his hunt had ended! A decrepit old hermit of the woods! Brackenbone was vigorous, dark-haired, clean shaven, and alert.

The young reporter swallowed a gulp of disappointment. What a fool he had made of himself! A wild goose chase! Asking his father to keep the presses

open! Making that half-promise to Maizie! Poor Maizie!

There was a touch on his arm.

"Well?" whispered Elmer.

"Gypped! Stung!" replied the young reporter bitterly. "We might as well light out for home. Unless—unless—" as a thought struck him. "But no. No man could disguise himself like that."

"Don't be too sure," whispered Elmer. "Someone was telling me that Brackenbone had been an actor in his early days."

"What?" exclaimed Roy, in astonishment.

"Yes," was the reply. "Followed it for some years. Naturally he'd be a dabster at disguising himself."

"Come along," interrupted Roy, grasping his friend's arm. "That may be the rascal in disguise—or some old man working for him."

A faint light had been struck in one of the rooms.

It was dark enough outside now to conceal their movements, and in a few seconds the chums reached the window through which the light was coming. They peered in over the sill.

A candle had been lighted and set on a table. Over a fire in a wood stove a pan had been placed and in the pan something was sizzling. The man was pouring some coffee from a canister into a pot.

While they watched, the man put some crockery and cutlery on the table. For one so venerable he moved with remarkable alacrity. The limp had disappeared.

The bent form had straightened up. The disguise was still remarkable. But now Roy Stover knew.

He was looking at John Brackenbone!

The man paused in his movements as though a thought had suddenly struck him. He unlocked a drawer, took out and opened a long and deep metal box.

From the depths of this, while the unseen spectators watched him breathlessly, he took huge packages of bank bills, counted the number of packages, and dropped them back with a grunt of satisfaction. His loot was still safe!

Roy nudged Elmer. Both were quivering with excitement.

The window had been opened a few inches from the bottom for air.

"Listen," breathed Roy. "I'm going to throw up this window. We'll call on him to put up his hands. Then while you cover him, I'll jump in and nab him. If he makes a break for front or back, you run around and stop him. Get me?"

"I'm on," said Elmer.

Roy waited till the man's back was turned. Then he threw up the window with a bang.

"Hands up!" yelled Roy. "Hands up, or we'll shoot!"

The man whirled about to find himself facing the muzzles of two pistols. For a moment he stood paralyzed. Then his hand darted toward an open table drawer.

"Stop right there!" cried Roy. "One more move and you get a bullet. Hands up!"

There was deadly determination in the voice, and the man slowly elevated his hands above his head.

"That's better. Keep him covered, Elmer."

With one leap Roy Stover was in the room.

As he jumped, his body came for a moment between the man and Elmer's revolver. Quick as a flash, the man took advantage of the opportunity and knocked the candle from the table, leaving the room in darkness. Then he turned and dashed into a room toward the back, with Roy Stover close on his heels.

"Round to the back, Elmer!" shouted Roy. "Head him off!"

But Brackenbone never reached the back door, for the next instant Roy Stover had flung himself upon the man and hurled him to the floor.

Down they went together, rolling over and over like a pair of tigers, each trying to get a grip on the other's throat!

CHAPTER XXX

BROUGHT TO JUSTICE

THAT awful battle in the dark was one that Roy Stover would remember to the end of his life.

His antagonist was the bigger and heavier of the two, and he fought with the fury of desperation. But Roy's muscles, too, were like steel, and in addition he had all the agility of the panther.

His pistol was knocked from his hands when he closed with his opponent, and it was a battle of man to man. Neither thought of surrendering or of giving quarter. Each was determined to fight to the death.

Panting, rolling, striking, grappling, they fought with all the strength that was in them. First one and then the other was on top, fists thudding, arms working like flails.

There was a violent pounding at the back door as Elmer Raymond tried to beat his way in. Baffled in this, he ran around to the other door, but there again his efforts were fruitless. All the time that fearful battle within went on.

At last Roy Stover got the grip he was seeking on his adversary's throat. His enemy fought furiously

to break that strangling hold, but Roy was not to be shaken off.

Deeper and deeper his fingers sank until the body under him sagged and the head fell limp. Instantly Roy Stover released his grip.

It was there that Elmer Raymond found him, sitting on the body of his foe and trying to regain his breath when, despairing of access any other way, he, Elmer, leaped through the window and came rushing up, revolver in hand.

"Are you hurt, Roy?" asked Elmer anxiously, turning his flashlight on his friend.

"No," panted Roy. "But I'm pretty badly done up. The fellow put up an awful fight. Afraid I'd killed him at first, but I can see he's coming to. Hustle around for some rope and we'll truss him up."

Elmer did so, and by the time consciousness returned to the man his hands and feet were securely tied.

Their captive glared at the two youths horribly.

"Naughty, naughty," admonished Roy, with a grin.

With two movements he snatched off the flowing white locks and the venerable beard. John Brackenbone stood revealed!

"Glad to find we didn't make any mistake," remarked Roy. "Come along now and we'll go home. There are a lot of people in Lakeport that are waiting to see you."

"I won't move a step," stormed Brackenbone. "This is an infernal outrage. Where's your warrant?"

"Here," said Roy, showing his pistol. "You'll go, all right. Elmer, get that stolen money from the drawer and we'll be moving."

At the mention of the money Brackenbone burst into a fearful paroxysm of fury. They let him rave.

Elmer approached the drawer and tried to open it. It stuck, and he was nonplussed and looked at the young reporter.

"I guess you're a bit nervous about this," grinned Roy. "Let me try it," and after several endeavors the two youths managed to open the drawer.

When they secured the stolen money Brackenbone was more furious than ever.

"You'll be sorry for this!" he raved. "I'll have the law on you. I haven't done anything wrong!"

"All right. I'll risk it," returned Roy coolly.

"You'll be lucky if you get less than ten years in prison for this," put in Elmer. "You're nothing but a dirty rat."

"Just set me free and I'll show you what I am!" bellowed Brackenbone.

When they were ready to go they yanked him to his feet, retied his hands securely, this time behind his back, cut the bonds from his feet, and commanded him to march, emphasizing the command by the prod of a pistol in the back. The game was up and the rascal could do nothing but obey.

They reached the car and the youths bundled the rascal into it. Elmer drove, and Roy Stover sat by Brackenbone's side, pistol in hand.

"Don't go too fast, Elmer," counseled Roy. "I don't want to get to Lakeport much short of midnight. By that time the *News* will have gone to press. They mustn't get a hint of it until it's too late. But will the *Eagle* get it? Oh, boy!"

Brackenbone broke out into fierce objurgations against newspapers and newspaper men in general, reserving his choicest epithets for reporters. Roy and Elmer listened with grins on their faces.

Elmer timed himself so accurately that the town clock was striking midnight when he drew up at the *Eagle* building.

Roy left his prisoner in his friend's charge while he dashed upstairs for a moment. He found his father pacing the floor and Gardner fuming.

"I've got him! I've got him!" cried Roy.

"Got whom?" they asked in chorus.

"Brackenbone! Brackenbone, the suicide! Brackenbone, the murdered man! Got him downstairs in the flesh, tied up in my car! Going down now to hand him over to the police! Tear out the old front page and get ready for the story. Be back as soon as I can."

Things began to buzz in the *Eagle* offices and there was wild excitement in the editorial and press rooms, as Roy Stover, without waiting for further questions, rushed down the stairs, jumped into the car, and urged Elmer to make full speed to the police station.

There Roy handed over his prisoner, poured into the astonished and delighted—if somewhat chagrined

—ears of the police the story of the capture. A short warrant on information and belief was sworn out and Brackenbone was remanded to a cell for a hearing on the morrow.

The young reporter hastened back with Elmer to the *Eagle* offices, threw off his coat and tore off sheet after sheet of copy of the greatest story that Lakeport had had for a long time and one that was sure to create an unbounded sensation. He had no time to polish it, but it was told with a fire and a life in it that made it a newspaper classic.

One angle of the story that had transpired while Roy was away was the capture of Benny Jones. A squad of police had raked the island fore and aft and ultimately captured the maniac. That he was a maniac was evident beyond all question, and he was being held in custody pending his removal to a suitable institution. This was done later on, and Roy, who had so nearly met death at his hands, never heard of him again.

When the *Eagle* came out the following morning it created a tremendous sensation. The capture of Brackenbone was on every tongue. In the streets, the shops, the factories, the business offices, the homes, it was the universal topic of conversation. And the brilliancy and courage of the young reporter were lauded to the skies. Elmer Raymond, too, came in for his full share of credit.

As for the *News*, that did not have a line of it. As for poor Hen Feley, who this time had a tomahawking

added to the previous scalping, as for everybody connected with the sheet from the proprietors down to the printers' devil—well, there are some things that should be shrouded under the veil of charitable silence.

Roy Stover would not have been human if he had not enjoyed his triumph to the full. The only fly in the ointment was the reflection that such a triumph might never happen again.

How greatly he was mistaken and what other mysteries of thrilling character were in store for him will be seen in the next volume of this series.

It was not only admiration for the young reporter's nerve and skill that stirred the people of Lakeport. Scores of families owed him a debt of gratitude. For with John Brackenbone had also been found the money of which he had swindled them, enough, as it ultimately proved, to reimburse them for all their losses.

When John Brackenbone was brought to trial he was sentenced to ten years in prison. It was what the rascal deserved and few were sorry for him, nor were they sorry for his cold and domineering daughter.

Roy's keenest pleasure came in lifting the cloud of misery from the Lawrence household. Victor Lawrence almost cried on his shoulder when he saw the young reporter.

"I can never repay you, Roy," he said, in a voice filled with emotion.

Roy did not see Maizie until two days later. Then she rushed at him when he entered the office and caught him by both hands.

"Oh, it was wonderful, Roy! Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "You're a real hero if ever there was one!" and she looked at him in a manner that meant volumes.

"Oh, that's all right—don't mention it," he replied a bit huskily. Then he could not say anything more but just kept looking at her until poor Maizie was blushing furiously.

A few minutes later Roy Stover was at his desk once more, trying to grind out more copy. He was whistling gayly to himself. He felt that he was close to the top rung of the ladder of success. Wasn't it a grand old world, anyway?

THE END





